

Ahmad Tohari's *The dancer*: Revisited

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ABSTRACT

As with many post-colonial countries, Indonesia has suffered from a long conflict between the military and civil society since its independence in 1945. This struggle is reflected in Ahmad Tohari's novel entitled *The dancer* (2012), which has been largely credited as being critical towards the military regime. Using the theories of depoliticisation, I argue that the novel is 1) largely supportive of the military regime due to the oppressive situation as well as the author's own political line, and 2) influenced by other powers besides the government. The fact that the novel dares to touch the once suppressed subjects of the Indonesian Communist Party (the arch enemy of the regime) and the anti-communist persecution shows a drive for politicisation. Nevertheless, further analysis shows that, by portraying it as highly political, *The dancer* actually depoliticises the party in that it only reinforces what has been said of the party and removes any alternative points of view. It also represses and depoliticises the military's persecution and killing of the suspected communists through the pretexts of self-defence, ignorance, and guilt.

Keywords: Suharto, PKI, 1965, depoliticisation, politicisation.

INTRODUCTION

The dancer occupies a unique position in the history of Indonesian literature and, to some extent, cinema. The novel was set in the early independence era, written and first adapted in the succeeding military/Suharto/New Order era, and re-published in its unabridged version and adapted once again in the post-Suharto time, thus covering all the eras in the post-independence Indonesia. The book and its adaptations encapsulate the long, internal struggles between the military and civil society, which are typical in post-colonial nations but still wanting in post-colonial criticism (Mukherjee, 1990; Huggan, 1997). Together they reflect the longstanding issue in the history of the country and the history of Indonesian literature and cinema: the practices of depoliticisation (usually associated with the government's political oppression) and politicisation (the civil society's attempts to promote political issues). This important issue has not been properly addressed in the existing literature on the novel and the adaptations as well as in post-colonial studies.

There have been several political readings of Tohari's novel. The common line in those studies is that they all believe that *The dancer* is critical of the anti-communist massacre in 1965-6 and the rise of the military regime. One of the few dissenting voices comes from John Roosa (2005), who argues that the

novel is anti-communist and pictures the mass killings as an understandable measure of popular self-defence. Using the theory of depoliticisation and politicisation, I argue that *The dancer* is 1) largely supportive of the Suharto regime's narrative on the Indonesian Communist Party (henceforth, the PKI) and the military, and 2) influenced not only by the government but also the market and the literary communities. I shall begin my argument by introducing the novel and the author, reviewing some existing studies of the novel, and outlining the approach. Then, I shall explore how Tohari incorporates both politicisation and depoliticisation in the novel and how he negotiates his way through the pressures from the government, market, and communities.

The dancer was first published as a trilogy of novels, namely, *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* (*The dancer of Paruk Village*, 1982), *Lintang kemukus dini hari* (*A shooting star at dawn*, 1985), and *Jantera bianglala* (*The rainbow's arc*, 1986). The trilogy is set immediately before, during, and shortly after the killing and persecution of the accused Indonesian Communist Party supporters (1965-6). The story of *The dancer* revolves around the life of a *ronggeng* or a traditional erotic dancer from Paruk village named Srintil, who performs in political rallies of the PKI. Following the killing of six army generals on 01 October 1965, the army under General Suharto accuses the PKI of being the mastermind of the movement and launches a

manhunt for the communists throughout the country (for a historical background of the conflict between the army and PKI, see Roosa, 2006). Srintil is implicated, captured, and imprisoned without trial. She survives the great ordeal but must continue her life with ex-communist status, which is the worst stigma one could have during the Suharto era (1966-98) in Indonesia.

After writing this trilogy, Ahmad Tohari reportedly had to face a long, 'ideological interrogation' by the military (Nugroho, 2015; National Book Committee, 2016). This should not be surprising since the trilogy is the first literary work to address the subject of the PKI and 1965 conflict. Aside from the intrinsic qualities of the work, it is this status as the pioneer of 1965 stories that has put *The dancer* on the national and, eventually, the international map. In an attempt to capitalise on the success of the first book of the trilogy, in 1983 Gramedia Film produced its cinematic adaptation under the title *Darah dan mahkota ronggeng* (*Blood and crown of the dancer*, my trans.). The trilogy was reprinted more than four times. The first and second books were translated into Japanese by Shinobu Yamane in 1986, Dutch by Monique Sardjono-Soesman in 1993 and 1998, and German by Giok Hiang Gornik in 1996 and 1997.

The unabridged version of the trilogy was eventually published in a single volume in 2003 following the collapse of the military regime and has been reprinted nine times. Also in 2003, Rene T. A. Lysloff translated the new version into English for international readers under the title *The dancer*. The English translation was revised and republished in 2012, following the release of the second film adaptation. Perhaps for the same reason, Sarjono-Soesman followed suit with the publication of the single-volume Dutch translation entitled *Dansmeisje uit mijn dorp: trilogie* in 2012. The second adaptation makes *The dancer* practically the only Indonesian political novel to have been adapted twice. More importantly, the novel was adapted in two different eras in post-independence Indonesia: the military and post-military eras.

Besides the public reception, *The dancer* has also attracted the interest of scholars both from the country and abroad. This novel has been studied numerous times, in various forms, and with different approaches (for a complete review, see Setiawan, 2017, pp. 14-30). Most of the studies, however, address the most controversial subject matter of the novel, i.e. the persecution and killing of the accused communists in 1965-6. Keith Foulcher (1998) credits *The dancer* as one of the first Indonesian novels written during the

military era that is "returning to the Indonesian novel's traditional concern with realist narrative and social criticism", and states that, "it does not shy away from the events of 1965 and 1966" (par. 18). Anna-Greta N. Hoadley (2005) takes this novel, along with a few others, to explain the tragedy of 1965-6 from the viewpoint of the victims, and thus to provide a counter version to the official history from the military regime. In response to Hoadley's book, Michael Bodden (2006) calls *The dancer* "the best known . . . of memorable works recounting the events of 1965-1966 and the effects of their aftermath" (p. 660-1). In contrast, Roosa (2005) considers Tohari and his colleagues "anti-communists . . . [who] tended to depict the communists as being aggressive, violent, and irreligious . . . [and] considered the mass killings and arrests in 1965-1966 an understandable . . . measure of popular self-defense" (p. 685-6). Michael Garcia (2004) contends that the greatest contribution of the book and the reason why it was censored is its "portrayal of local deprivation following Suharto's rise to power" instead of its depiction of the anti-communist campaign as widely believed (p. 122).

This article tries to approach this ongoing debate on the novel's political position(-ing) from the perspective of depoliticisation and politicisation as proposed by political theorists Matthew Flinders and Matt Wood. Flinders and Wood (2014) observe that scholars in the past have often associated depoliticisation with "the denial of politics or the imposition of a specific (and highly politicised) model of statecraft" (p. 136). In the New Order context, depoliticisation was regularly linked with the restriction of politics in every sector of life, including literature, by the Suharto regime. Political scholars these days define depoliticisation more broadly as 'attempts to stifle or diffuse conflict' (p. 139). Within this new perspective, depoliticisation is not always enforced by governments on people and individuals (top-down) through coercive measures. It can be multi-source and multi-directional, started by any political agents from any political arenas, and followed by other agents in other arenas. It operates in both obviously politically biased arenas (such as state, government, and parliament) and ostensibly politically neutral realms (such as culture, literature, and cinema).

Wood and Flinders (2014) propose three primary forms of depoliticisation: governmental, societal, and discursive. Governmental depoliticisation generally refers to the transfer of governmental power from elected politicians to professionals, experts, or specialists. In the case of Indonesia, this is best represented by the transfer of power from elected politicians to military and civilian professionals

during the military era. Societal depoliticisation involves roles performed by the media (including publishing companies), corporations, and social organisations in demoting social issues to individual affairs. This can be seen, for instance, in the common demotion of poverty from a problem of structural injustice to that of individuals' talent and perseverance in New Order literature. Finally, when certain issues are thoroughly repressed and/or considered normal, natural, or permanent by means of language and discourse (including novels), this process is identified as discursive depoliticisation. Using the last example, discursive depoliticisation takes place when the issue of poverty in literature ceases to be a problem of individuals' hard work and becomes an issue of fate or luck.

What is often forgotten is that depoliticisation works hand-in-hand with politicisation, that is, 'the emergence and intensification of friend-enemy conflict' (Flinders and Wood, 2014, p. 139). While depoliticisation demotes an issue from the governmental arena up to the realm of fate/necessity, politicisation does the opposite (see Figure 1). As Matthew Flinders and Jim Buller (2006) state, "depoliticisation and politicisation may actually take place concurrently" (p. 313). They should actually be seen more as "a rebalancing or a shift in the nature of discursive relationships that is a matter of degree — not a move from land to sea, but from cave to mountain or valley to plateau" (p. 297). The following analysis will try to capture not only the politics of depoliticisation, but also that of politicisation in *The dancer*.

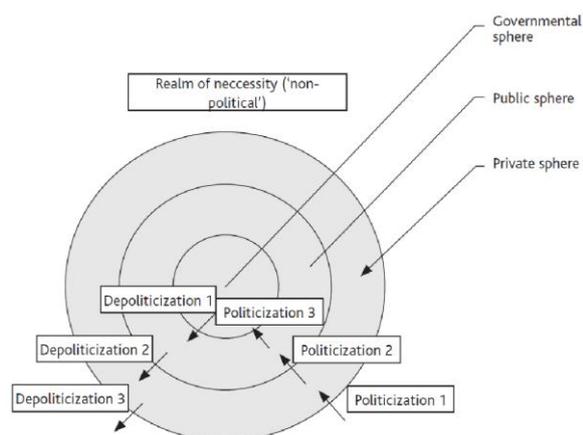


Fig. 1. Hay's model of depoliticisation and politicisation (Source: Hay, 2007, p. 79.)

THE RED

The invitation to dance at the celebration of Independence Day marks the beginning of Srintil's and Paruk village's contact with the most controversial party in Indonesian history, the PKI. The party

is personified by Bakar, "a man from Dawuan who was a very clever orator and always gave fiery speeches" (Tohari, 2012, p. 248). Bakar is a member of the PKI, which was "the largest party in Indonesia", and is its regional leader in Dawuan district (Roosa, 2006, p. 207). As the strongest party in the country, the PKI enjoyed a close relation with the leftist President Sukarno and, therefore, the government's bureaucracy at all levels. This is the very network that Bakar uses to seduce Srintil and the Paruk community to support the party. They need Bakar because, with his social power, he can make Srintil and her ronggeng troupe perform regularly at the party's political rallies as well as the government's celebrations. Aside from the financial rewards, Srintil and the villagers of Paruk need that wide exposure to show other villages in the Dawuan district that Paruk has a new ronggeng dancer.

Bakar also showers Srintil and her ronggeng troupe with lavish gifts. To begin with, "Bakar presented Srintil and her troupe with the gift of a complete sound system, the first electronic equipment to enter Paruk Village, and it became a source of great pride among its inhabitants" (Tohari, 2012, p. 249). He also gives the ronggeng troupe complete outfits, as reported: "he had come to the hamlet with a fatherly attitude, giving them a sound system, even presented the musicians with complete outfits" (p. 250). All of these effectively put the ronggeng troupe of Paruk village far above the other troupes in the region and thus help to fulfil Paruk's collective aspiration to win back its socio-cultural prestige. Srintil herself finds in Bakar "a perfect father figure. He was friendly, and seemed to understand many things, including her personal feelings" (p. 248). This personal touch certainly fills a gap in the psyche of the fatherless dancer.

On the other hand, Bakar needs this traditional dancing troupe with its famous mascot Srintil to attract and gain support from the working class in the Dawuan district. With her popularity and charisma, Srintil can easily gather a thousand people in a field to watch her dancing and, more importantly, to hear the party's political speeches afterwards. As the narrator says: "all he wanted was to use Srintil and her troupe as a means to draw masses and, at the same time, to put him in a position of authority" (Tohari, 2012, p. 251). In other words, the novel portrays the party as exploiting Srintil's sexuality to achieve its political goal whereas exploiting female sexuality is actually against every known principle of Communism.

The power relations between Srintil and Paruk village and Bakar appear to be mutual, if not equal. Nevertheless, as Michel Foucault (1995) explicates,

power relations are full of “instability” and “inversion” (p. 27). The balance of power starts to swing in Bakar’s favour despite the impression that he spends a great deal more than Srintil and her ronggeng troupe can pay back. Yet, there lies Bakar’s ingenious strategy. He deliberately makes Srintil and Paruk unable to pay him back and therefore fall into one of the strongest Javanese values: indebtedness (Magnis-Suseno, 1997). Despite her grandfather Sakarya’s initial complaint, Srintil and the Paruk elders allow Bakar to include political slogans in Srintil’s songs and adorn each entrance to the village with party symbols. In addition, Srintil and the villagers are willing to modify their sacred ritual to please the philosophically materialist Bakar.

Srintil and Paruk village eventually become one entity with the PKI due to Bakar’s manipulation of the villagers’ sacred belief. He secretly has the tomb of Ki Secamenggala, the most respected site in Paruk, vandalised and destroyed. As described in the novel: “[n]ever before had the people of Paruk felt so deeply insulted. The hamlet was gloomy and quiet with restrained rage. The inhabitants were all of one mind, ready to pay back with interest the insult they had received” (Tohari, 2012, p. 257). Bakar also uses this incident to stir up political animosity between the villagers and his political enemy. He has a green hat, a political icon of *Nadhlatul Ulama*, the PKI’s political competitor in Central and East Java, left near the vandalised tomb. This is enough to make the politically ignorant villagers of Paruk actively oppose the Islamic party. Srintil and her ronggeng troupe, who begin to feel uncomfortable performing at the political rallies, now wholeheartedly give their consent to the PKI.

Taken together, Tohari does give a voice to the then absolutely banned political party, and this is an act of discursive and societal politicisation as it promotes the once unspoken subject to the private and social arena for deliberation. Nevertheless, the PKI is given a strongly negative voice and role in the story and is portrayed as a cunning political party, doing everything it can to achieve its political end. What is being expressed of the party in the novel is merely its manipulation and propaganda. By portraying it as highly political, *The dancer* actually depoliticises the PKI in that it only reinforces what has been taught about the party and removes the possibility of new debates. Despite their initial resistance, Srintil and her community are gradually suppressed and depoliticised in the story of their contact with the party. The villagers are portrayed as uncritical victims of the manipulation and propaganda of the PKI. The possibility that they are intellectually stimulated by

and attracted to the programmes of the Communists is also thoroughly repressed whereas, as Rhoma Yuliantri dan Muhidin Dahlan (2008) point out, many traditional performers at the time were very attracted to the progressive programmes of the PKI.

Simultaneously, Tohari represses the PKI’s political discourses, which attracted millions of people to join its rank and file. For a novel considered ‘political’ by the public and scholars, *The dancer* does not really offer markedly political discourses. It might be logical not to have them in the first part of the book because Srintil and the Paruk villagers have not yet encountered Bakar and the PKI but the two parties interact intensively the second part. Curiously, the party itself is never named throughout the novel and is only distinguished by its attributes of “red hats, red banners, and red letters” (Tohari, 2012, p. 220).

The omniscient narrator, who does not show any inhibition in commenting on the characters and events in the first part, suddenly becomes less ‘talkative’. The only rather explicit political discourse in the novel is as follows:

On one occasion, a party organizer came to the village and handed out party posters. On them were pictures of what the man called “*the downtrodden proletariat*” [emphasis added].

At first Sakarya had been interested, because people who came to the village often mentioned the word “*proletariat*” [emphasis added], which he interpreted the word to mean “subjects”. Everyone in Paruk thought of themselves as subjects, but he became confused when the man began to speak of “*the miserable proletariat* [emphasis added] being victims of the evil oppressors”.

“Who are these ‘victims of the oppressors’,” he asked the man.

“You yourself, and all the inhabitants of this village,” the man answered. “Your blood is being sucked dry so that all that’s left is what you see now: misery! On top of this you can add ignorance and all kinds of disease. It’s time for you to stand up with us.”

Wait a minute. You say we’re oppressed. Are you sure? We don’t feel oppressed. Honestly! We’ve always lived here peacefully. . . .

“But who are these ‘oppressors’?”

“*The imperialists, capitalists, colonialists, and their lackeys* [emphasis added]. There’s no mistaking them.” (Tohari, 2012, pp. 196-7)

The comparison between the English and Indonesian versions shows that the latter is more politically repressed than the former. To start with, there is no

explicit political jargon in the Indonesian dialogue. What Lysloff translates into “the downtrodden proletariat”, “proletariat”, and “the miserable proletariat” (Tohari, 2012, p. 196) are actually two Indonesian lexical items of “*rakyat*” and “*rakyat yang tertindas*” in the original version (Tohari, 2011, p. 183). They respectively mean “people” and “oppressed people”, which do not actually carry Marxist connotations that are as strong as the English translations.

The real-life PKI created other political jargon for the ‘imagined’ class they were fighting for. Other examples are ‘*proletar*’ (proletariat) and ‘*kominis*’ (communists); none of this jargon is mentioned in the novel. Only once does the PKI’s popular jargon ‘*buruh*’ (worker) appear in the novel but it is used as a verb that in Indonesian has a very general meaning (to work). Nevertheless, when it comes to how the party refers to its enemies, the Indonesian version generously reproduces the jargon: “*kaum penindas, kaum imperialis, kapitalis, kolonialis, dan para kaki tangannya penindas*” (Tohari, 2011, p. 183), which respectively translate in the English version to “[t]he oppressors, imperialists, capitalists, colonialists, and their lackeys” (Tohari, 2012, p. 197). In other words, Tohari represses how the PKI represented itself and its imagined class but explicitly exposes how the party cursed its enemies. With this representation, the PKI emerges as a negative political force, the political party that constantly curses and blames others; not the one that can identify itself and its genuine liberatory programmes for the masses.

A similar strategy is further applied when the author describes the political rallies and demonstrations of the PKI. There are at least five occasions on which he reports the rallies and demonstrations (Tohari, 2012, pp. 193-5; 201-3; 251-2; 253-4; 258). Only once, however, does he explicitly express the contents and words of the speeches. Those contents and words are once again specific curses to the enemies of the party (p. 202). In regard to other events, the speeches are reported indirectly with the same dismissive manner that is used to describe Srintil’s grandfather Sakarya’s first encounter with a man of the party. They are reported as “incomprehensible to the simple people from Paruk” or “difficult for simple villagers to understand” (p. 251).

The novel prefers to describe the atmosphere and effect of the speeches on the masses instead. The situations and outcomes are consistently portrayed as “noisy, unruly affairs” (Tohari, 2012, p. 251). One example is as follows:

One night, after a rally in which she had danced, hundreds of the spectators went berserk. As if

possessed, they rampaged through rice paddies, plundering the ripening crops. The situation became violent as the owners arrived to protect their fields. By the time the police had arrived, seven bodies lay on the ground covered in blood. The first brawl was followed by a second a month later, and another the following month. During the third riot, the situation was particularly tense. It took place in the daytime, and involved hundreds of aggressors fighting the owners of fields. A full-scale war of hoes and sickles was avoided only because of the timely arrival of the police. (pp. 253-4)

The PKI’s rallies are thus not only pictured as “noisy and unruly affairs” but also bloody and deadly. The party is called the “aggressors” while the owners are the rightful protectors of their own fields. The established class is also represented by the police, who are pictured as the saviour of the situations.

It can be therefore said that the novel agrees with, if not supports, the military’s ruling discourse *vis-à-vis* the subject of Communists and, further, political parties. On this account, this finding is in line with Roosa’s allegation as mentioned earlier. Repression of the communist discourses, as practised by Tohari, was not completely motivated by what Foucault (1981) identifies as the exclusionary procedure of “prohibition” for the novel was still legally published and the Communists still appear in the story (p. 52). It refers to another external exclusionary mechanism, “the opposition between madness and reason” (p. 53). The Communists’ speeches are portrayed as ‘madness’ while their enemies (the field owners and the policemen) are framed as ‘reason’. By extension, the madness was further associated with mass politics and political parties in general, signifying the Suharto regime’s suspicion towards both.

There are two possible explanations for the repression of the political discourses in the novel. First, Tohari might have been forced by the situation to do this as the government was hypersensitive to political discourses and paranoid about the Communists in particular. Considering the dangerous atmosphere at the time, authors would consciously or unconsciously perform self-censorship to avoid future trouble with the government, which managed to ban about two thousand books (Stanley, 1996). To put this in perspective, the regime exiled and impoverished the Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer for 14 years without trial for his writings, and imprisoned university students for photocopying his works (see Heryanto, 2006). The political problems with the government could further manifest in economic

difficulties because their books would be banned from the market. The threat of political imprisonment and economic impoverishment were effective in making most authors either treat political discourses implicitly or abandon them completely.

Another strong possibility is that the author himself does not agree with Communism and the PKI. This is consistent with his political manifesto:

I'm not a communist and I'm certainly not an atheist. Perhaps I am what you'd call a socialist, but one who honors humanistic liberalism, which is bound up in my sense of social responsibility. (Lysloff, 2012, pp. x-xi)

This political position is made clearer by his statements elsewhere:

I wrote this because of my sense of humanity. I didn't have the heart to watch laymen slaughtered only because of the accusation of being PKI members. If it were Aidit [chairman of the PKI], go ahead. Nyoto [Central Committee member], go ahead, they were the real communists. But how come these villagers were killed, too? (Nugroho, 2015, par. 12, my trans.)

It is evident that Tohari's socialist sympathy goes to the ignorance and poor being wrongly accused of and unfairly punished for Communism. That is why the novel sympathises with Srintil and the Paruk community as innocently accused communists, but not with Bakar, as the conscious, self-confessed communist. This happened to be the political stance of the liberal humanist literary circles which dominated the literary scene during the Suharto era. Tohari himself, in the above quotation, identifies himself with the "humanistic liberalism". It is little wonder that *The dancer* received critical acclaim from the literary communities at the time. Interestingly, high appreciation also came from the left-wing groups who grew after the collapse of the Suharto regime and proclaimed themselves as the nemesis of the liberals. It does seem to matter to them that the novel does not offer fresh perspectives on the Communists and the army. The fact that it dares to mention the once forbidden subject of the PKI at all is considered a significant achievement, considering the oppressive situation at the time of its writing.

Commercially, the mere mention of the Communists, be it negative or positive, also attracted the politically starved market of the Suharto era. Metaphorically, reading *The dancer* was like riding a roller coaster. There was an element of danger for the contemporary readers, but they knew that it was safe. As a result,

Tohari has enjoyed a wide readership as well as having his novel adapted twice, which is an extremely rare case in Indonesia.

THE GREEN

The PKI is not the only representative of the Dawuan city in the novel. Dawuan is also epitomised by the army, the historical arch enemy of the Communists, stationed in that city. If the red party represents the negative side of Dawuan, the green force stands for the positive face of the city. The main representative of the military is Rasmus, who is originally a villager and Srintil's first love. Frustrated by the prospect that Srintil will give up her virginity to the highest bidder in her initiation ceremony as a dancer, Rasmus runs away from Paruk village and works as an office boy at a local army base. There he befriends and wins the trust of Sergeant Slamet, who teaches him to read and eventually recruits him as a soldier.

While exposing the Communists' actions, the novel represses the exploits of the army as the main pillar of the Suharto regime. The story of Rasmus and Sergeant Slamet shows that, unlike the Communists, the military does not politicise and exploit the villagers but educates them. And what a fine man the military makes of Rasmus! The novel is filled with Rasmus' sophisticated reflections about himself and his surroundings. This can be seen from his reflection below:

The longer I lived away from my tiny homeland, the more I was able to *critically* [emphasis added] evaluate life in Paruk. I realized that the poverty there was maintained in perpetuity by the ignorance and laziness of the inhabitants. They were satisfied with just being farm workers or with small-scale cultivation of cassava. Whenever there was a small harvest, liquor could be found in every home. The sounds of the calung ensemble and the singing of the ronggeng dancer were the lullabies of the people. Indeed, Sakarya had been correct when he said that, without calung and ronggeng, life was dreary for the people of Paruk. Calung and ronggeng performances also provided people with an opportunity to dance socially and drink *ciu* to their heart's content. (Tohari, 2012, p. 89)

Rasmus' retrospective and critical discourse might remind readers of Karl Marx's (1844) (in)famous statements:

The wretchedness of religion is at once an expression of and a protest against real wretchedness. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. (p. 131)

Ronggeng practically functions as a religion to Paruk village; it is said in the novel that the Paruk villagers do not follow any organised religion (Tohari, 2012, p. 252). Ronggeng, in Rasmus' critical opinion, is "the lullabies of the people" or, in Marx's terminology, "the opium of the people"; it consoles as well as subdues the Paruk villagers. Another critical and historical reflection of the military man can also be found in the conclusion of the novel (pp. 51-2).

Stylistically, Rasmus frequently uses calques or loan translations, which are the Indonesian urbanites' way of signalling their high level of education. Calques and loan words come from many sources but, with the recent cultural hegemony of the English-speaking countries, they have become increasingly English. Besides "critically" in the last passage, another example of Rasmus' calques can be found in the following reflection:

I stood near the front of the crowd, thinking. If there had been people in the village who could discuss things like artistic *appreciation* [emphasis added] or, even better, a means to evaluate it, whose *appreciation* [emphasis added] of Srintil's performance would have been the most profound? I arrogantly believed that my admiration was the deepest. (Tohari, 2012, p. 47)

The calques in the original version are "kritis" and "apresiasi" (Tohari, 2011, pp. 86; 47), which are respectively derived from the English words "critically" and "appreciation", as emphasised above. Even in today's democratic atmosphere those two words would still be likely used by Indonesians with a tertiary education. The words and the syntaxes are also, respectively, too low-frequency and complex for the uneducated Rasmus. The stylistic strategies above embody the Foucauldian opposition between truth and falsehood as well as discursive depoliticisation. As observed separately by Foucault (1981), Edward Said (1983), and Wood and Flinders (2014), modernism and modern subjects ascribe the ultimate truth to science and knowledge. Truthful discourses are those which ground themselves on scientific language or, in Rasmus' case, intellectual language. Rasmus' intellectual register signifies the truthfulness of his assertions and, by association, the military's discourses.

This truthfulness of assertions is further supported by the exclusion of the military's sexual abuse and atrocity in the story. In contrast to the PKI's sexual exploitation for politics, the military is portrayed as asexual or, at worst, not sexually exploitative. There is no instance in which the military officers, except for

Rasmus, do anything related to sex and sexuality. That Rasmus is an exceptional case is understandable because he is originally from the 'primitive' village and therefore is pictured as more sexual than the other soldiers (see, for instance, Tohari, 2012, pp. 86-8). Nevertheless, Rasmus' sexual immorality declines after his contact with the city and the military. As he gratefully admits: "Dawuan Market provided me with wider horizons on many fronts. Previously, my only world had been Paruk with all its cursing and swearing, its poverty, and its sanctioned indecencies" (p. 87). His moral restraint gets stronger after his appointment as a military officer and he eventually rejects Srintil the erotic dancer altogether (p. 390)

Last but certainly not least, *The dancer* also suppresses the persecution and killing of the suspected communists by the army and its militia. For a novel that is regularly related to the event and was made famous by this association, *The dancer*, curiously, does not say much about the massacre of the Communists. Out of the three parts and 478 pages of the novel, Tohari devotes only a few pages to the event and narrates the persecution and killings very implicitly. To begin with, the houses in Paruk are burnt to ashes, but the actors are not identified at all (pp. 264-7). It is reported that "[O]fficials . . . came to Paruk afterwards", implying that the military officers were not involved in the torching at all. The novel, therefore, reiterates the Suharto regime's statement that it was common people who had got sick and tired of the Communists that committed the atrocity (Soeharto, 1991). Moreover, none of the Paruk villagers are reported killed or missing. It is said that everybody goes home safe and sound (Tohari, 2012, pp. 277-8). The ordeals that Srintil experiences are explicitly repressed in the name of time and maturity:

That the upheaval in Srintil's life had just begun the day she was first jailed is narrated elsewhere. That story begins with the story of a beautiful ronggeng twenty years old, who was physically imprisoned and held psychologically captive within the walls of history, *walls that had risen out of selfish greed and misadventure* [emphasis added].

To enable us to open the pages of that story, specific conditions must be met. One of these is the passage of time, which has *the power to dissolve all sentimentality* [emphasis added]. The conditions also demand a maturity of character and a certain degree of honesty in the reader which would provide the courage to acknowledge historical truth. Only if these conditions are met, can the story of Srintil be told. If they are not met, the story will disappear forever to become a part of the secret that surrounds Paruk. (p. 267)

Besides the fact that “the upheaval . . . is narrated elsewhere”, the novel blames Srintil’s imprisonment on “selfish greed and misadventure”, which have been associated with the Paruk villagers and the PKI. The military is totally out of the picture. The narrator also mentions the power of time to dissolve all sentimentality, which certainly refers to the victims of the persecution rather than the perpetrators.

Although he is specifically assigned to monitor and clear the village from the Communists, Rasus, the main representative of the military in this novel, is portrayed as innocent, as can be seen from the following confession:

Perhaps it was because of this vow that I had often felt inner conflict when I was stationed in Central Java immediately after the upheaval of 1965. I often had to fire mortar shells on bunkers that were *probably filled with human beings* [emphasis added]. Fortunately, *I never saw with my own eyes the people who fell* [emphasis added], cowering under the onslaught of bombs that I had fired. But, I once found myself in a critical situation where *I had only two choices, to kill or be killed* [emphasis added]. I chose the former. My opponent was a young man swinging a machete. He was the one that collapsed in death because my bayonet was faster than his machete. I saw him just before he died, gasping for breath, his eyes wide and staring, his chest torn open by my bayonet. Aside from the political motivations that drove him to join the rebels, he was just a man like myself. And I murdered him. (Tohari, 2012, p. 433).

There are several narrative strategies that the author uses above to depoliticise Rasus’ killing of the Communists. First, it is implied that there is a possibility that Rasus does not kill anyone at all. After all, Rasus never sees with his own eyes the people who die because of his shells. The bunkers were only “probably filled with human beings”. Second, when he eventually kills, it is because he must protect himself, not because of a political difference. The killing of the Communists is not a matter of choice and is thus depoliticised. By extension, the same argument has been widely used by the military forces to justify the massacre. They killed the Communists because they were attacked first and had to defend themselves (Notosusanto & Saleh, 1993). Third, Rasus and the other military officers are pictured as feeling deep guilt about the depoliticised killing. This practically makes him and his colleagues as much the victims as the killed communists, whereas the real culprit is the situation or, in Wood and Flinders’ (2014) term, “the realm of fate” (p. 155).

Thus, Rasus and the military are there only to reinforce the grand narrative about the apolitical military. This discursive depoliticisation saved the author from the worst retribution of the regime’s ideological policing. Although Tohari had to undergo an interrogation by the state apparatus for breaking the taboos, he saved himself by not attacking the main pillar of the regime and even put the army in a positive light. This ‘hedging’ fundamentally represents the Foucauldian inclusionary mechanism of ‘commentary’. Paraphrasing Foucault, Said (1983) says: “over and above every opportunity for saying something, there stands a regularizing collectivity called a discourse” (p. 186). Tohari might have flirted to a certain extent with the discourses of resistance, but, in the end, he conformed to the demands of the ruling discourses.

CONCLUSION

The dancer is an extended metaphor of how an author negotiates his way through the pressures from the government, the market, and the communities. The novel depoliticises the PKI in that it only reinforces what has been believed about the party and removes the possibility of new debates on the party. The depoliticisation of the PKI was an area of convergence of the author’s political belief and the regime’s anti-communist ideology. Ironically, the mere appearance of the Communists, be it negative or positive, attracted the interest of the public in the anti-communist country. While the PKI represents the negative side of Dawuan, the military, through the character of Rasus, stands for the positive face of the city. In contrast to the PKI’s political exploitation of sexuality, the military is portrayed as asexual or, at least, not sexually exploitative. The novel also represses and depoliticises the military’s persecution and killing of the suspected communists through the pretexts of self-defence, ignorance, and guilt. Nevertheless, I am not saying that the author was a passive object of the dominant ideology of the Suharto regime, nor do I wish to project Tohari as a lackey of the regime. In fact, the third part of the same book critically exposes the hypocrisy of the civilian professional class, another important pillar of the regime. This, I believe, is the better reason why the author was interrogated, and this would, I am afraid, be a different article.

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