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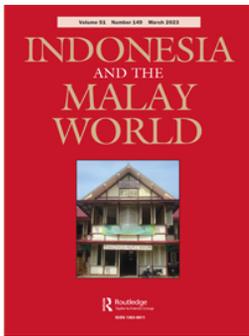
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MINANGKABAU MALE ANGST AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MODE

Darman Moenir's *Bako*

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ABSTRACT

Darman Moenir's autobiographical novel, *Bako*, relates the experience of the protagonist – the 'I' of the narrative – residing with his mother in the community of his father's relatives, the *bako* of the title. According to the principles of Minangkabau matriliney, neither he nor his mother are members of the father's kin group and there is a tension in the relationship between mother and son on one side and the *bako* on the other. Through successive chapters, each concerning a significant individual in the protagonist's boyhood and adolescence, the novel explores this tension and its effects on his mother. A close reading of key passages that employ a narrative device of shifting voices – the boy's, the narrator's, the author's – reveals how the writing works to persuade the reader of the dramatic intensity of the boy's quest for self-knowledge. A comparison with novels of Minangkabau society of an earlier period shows both continuity and change. The undisguised use of autobiographical experience on which the novel draws is explored through an illuminating comparison with Pramoedya Ananta Toer's stories and through a glance at the genre of Japanese autobiographical novels and its conventions.

ABSTRAK

Bako, novel Darman Moenir yang berdasarkan riwayat hidup diri dia sendiri, menceritakan bagaimana 'aku' tinggal bersama dengan ibunya di kampung Bapaknya. Keadaan ini merupakan sesuatu yang berseberangan dengan kebiasaan aturan Minangkabau, karena menurut prinsip kekerabatan di situ mereka bukan anggota dari keluarga dan suku Bapak – yang disebut bako dalam istilah Minang. Hubungan antara 'aku' serta ibunya di satu pihak dan bako di pihak satu lagi sering diliputi ketegangan. Tiap satu bab berkaitan dengan salah satu orang yang berpengaruh pada perkembangan watak 'aku', dan mengulas bagaimana ketegangan berkembang dan berdampak pada ibu. Kalau kita membaca dengan seksama dua tiga bagian kunci bila penulis sengaja menggunakan gaya khusus sastra, di mana tiga suara – suara si anak, suara si pencerita, suara penulis sendiri – sekaligus dicampuraduk, kita menjadi sadar bagaimana penulis sangat pandai mengungkapkan ikhtiar 'aku' untuk mencari

KEYWORDS

Autobiographical fiction;
Indonesian literature;
Minangkabau kinship

KATA KUNCI

Novel otobiografis; kritikan
sastra Indonesia modern;
sistem kekerabatan
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makna hidup. Kalau kita memperbandingkan Bako dengan novel-novel Minang dari zaman sebelumnya kita dapat menemui perobahan dan kesinambungan. Penggunaan pengalaman Darman Moenir sendiri secara terang-terangan dalam Bako disoroti pula dengan memperbandingkan novel-novel awal Pramoedya – yang juga bersifat otobiografis - di samping memandang sepintas ke novel Jepang otobiografis dan kaidah-kaidahnya.

The autobiographical novel, *Bako*, by Darman Moenir (1956–), a fictionalised account of the author's boyhood and adolescence in West Sumatra (the Minangkabau region) was published in 1983. It is an outstanding novel that, despite occasional mentions, has not been given the attention it deserves. In what follows I want to redress this neglect by demonstrating the rewards that come from a close reading of the text that pays due heed to three issues: the specific implications of Minangkabau kinship prescriptions, the ostensible plot of the novel, with some reference to how these have been treated in a tradition of earlier Minangkabau novels; recent theoretical writing about the fictionality of autobiographical experience; and an intertextual reading of the novel that compares it to the Javanese examples to be found in the autobiographical fiction of Pramoedya Ananta Toer. An awareness of how these three issues impinge on its composition significantly enhances the reader's appreciation of the novel.

It will immediately be noted by those familiar with the history of the modern Indonesian novel, that in writing an autobiographical novel about a Minangkabau family, Darman Moenir is renewing links with a colonially established form of the novel which had come to an abrupt end during the years of the Japanese occupation and the subsequent revolutionary period. In the 1920s and 1930s the Dutch colonial publishing house, Balai Pustaka, had encouraged Minangkabau writers to write novels about their own society, and in particular about changes which were taking place as a consequence of modernisation. These early Balai Pustaka novels had to make clear to the reader the fundamental principles of the organisation of Minangkabau society,¹ so that the modernisation which was occurring there could be understood within an appropriate cultural context. This meant, above all, an explanation of how matriliney – the principle of how clan membership passes through the female line – is realised in West Sumatra. Here is not the place to look at those novels in detail but the interested reader who wishes to know more about the context may care to turn to Watson (1972: 45–98) and, for readers of Dutch, Postel-Coster (1985), that describe the sociological and historical background of the production of those novels and the issues of kinship dynamics that are represented there.

In so far as this cultural world of the Minangkabau is also the subject of Darman Moenir's autobiographical novel, it shows some continuity with this earlier tradition, but there are differences, and it clearly moves on from the conventions of the latter. We can, for example, observe how the theme of marriage, although important, is not

¹Though it must be said there are always problems about reading off ethnographic detail from literary texts such as these Minangkabau novels. On this and related problems of reading novels as ethnographic accounts of society, the reader is referred to Watson (2021).

All translations of the *Bako* novel are mine.

the pivot of the story, nor is romantic love, a subject central to the Balai Pustaka novels, an issue. Instead the novel is about the significance of local traditions and differences within different communities in Minangkabau society itself. Crucial to understanding here is the title *Bako*. The term is unknown to Indonesians outside Minangkabau, but for the Minangkabau themselves it is a word pregnant with meaning. It is the kinship term used to refer generically to the matrilineal relatives of one's father, thus one's father's mother, father's sisters, father's sisters' children, father's mother's brother. All these are within a matrilineal system of a different lineage to oneself – in anthropological terms they are the bride takers from one's own lineage (although things are not quite perceived like this in Minangkabau itself) – and they stand in a special relationship to the individual (ego in anthropological terms). But, although the relationship with one's *bako* is important, it has never previously been the focus of Minangkabau novels. Darman Moenir is here breaking new ground in explaining what goes on with respect to Minangkabau perceptions of one of their most highly charged institutions of kinship.

Two further aspects of Minangkabau culture need to be understood by the reader of the novel. Where marriage is not uxori-local, that is, when it is not the case that the husband comes to live in his wife's house, but on the contrary, the wife accompanies her husband to his natal home, then a woman is moving into a domestic environment which is strange to her, one that is at least potentially hostile. If, in addition, the marriage is between a couple from two different villages, the woman is moving not only to an alien household, but also to a village where she is not familiar with the local village traditions. Within Minangkabau society this emphasis on local variations from the general cultural forms is vital for establishing a sense of an individual's identity and purpose.

An individual's origins – his or her *asal-usul* is the term used – both in the sense of genealogy and place, are the key features through which, initially, one is evaluated in the eyes of others. This theme is central to *Bako*, since what is related in the novel is the marriage between a man from the central Minangkabau highlands (the region known as *darat*) with a woman from the West coast (the *pasisir* region). On marriage the couple, contrary to custom, go to live in the husband's natal home, and the child of the marriage, the 'aku' ('I') of the story thus grows up among his *bako*. In the circumstances in which the mother is living among 'strangers' where she feels that she does not belong, she becomes mentally disturbed, and the situation thus created is the issue on which the novel turns. The narrator describes the circumstances in which he grew up in that environment by looking at the principal individuals in his years of childhood among the *bako*. One chapter is devoted to each of these. Thus, the book begins with chapter entitled 'Ayah' (Father) and is followed by 'Ibu' (mother) and by three further chapters, respectively, 'Umi' (Aunt – FZ, father's sister), 'Bak Tuo' (FB father's brother) and 'Gaek' (Old Man) The link between the chapters is the figure of *aku* himself, but at the same time there is a complicated overlapping in terms of the way in which the relationships between the individuals is revealed.

As well as diverging in these critical ways from the earlier Minangkabau novels in terms of subject matter, *Bako* also differs in its formal structure. It is narrated in the first person and, recognisably, it is genealogically linked to another genre of Indonesian literature, autobiographical fiction, which emerged only after the colonial period. Consequently, it will help us to understand the nature of Darman Moenir's novel if we look at how this later genre has influenced him, but before we do this I want briefly to set things

in the comparative context of autobiographical fiction in a different national tradition. I hope to bring out some similarities and differences and by doing so alert the reader to the way in which Darman Moenir is playing with a specific set of autobiographical conventions. A brief comparison with much documented Japanese autobiographical fiction is particularly instructive.

The autobiographical 'I' novel in modern Japanese literature, the so-called (*wataku*)*shi-shosetsu* emerged in the late 19th-century in Japan from an artistic desire to write in imitation of European naturalism, coupled with a reluctance to write in a directly autobiographical mode. This reluctance arose, according to George Sansom, because 'discretion and reserve are cardinal features of Japanese social life and to enlarge upon one's own affairs is thought presumptuous' (quoted in Hibbett 1955: 349). One immediately sees here a sentiment which is recognised in Malay-Indonesian culture: to make oneself ostentatiously the focus of a formal narrative would here, too, be considered highly inappropriate. From this tension, then, between the desire to record naturalistically, that is to be as profoundly realistic as possible through self-analysis and introspection, and the pressure to preserve cultural decorum, there emerges in Japan the *shi-shosetsu*, where the use of a first-person narrator allows the writer to be psychologically honest to himself, at the same time as the cloak of fiction allows at least a pretence of disguise which obscures him from the reader. In this way cultural convention and the artistic demand for self-expression are simultaneously satisfied.²

I do not intend to pursue the comparison with Japanese literature much further nor indeed do I have the competence to do so,³ but one further point needs to be made before turning back to modern Indonesian literature. In Japan one of the directions in which the *watakushi-shosetsu* seems to have developed was towards a confessional form in which the writer is concerned Rousseau-like with self-revelation, laying himself bare to the reader in order to achieve supreme realism.

For a number of reasons, deriving in large measure from post-colonial circumstances as well as from pre-colonial cultural traditions,⁴ the intensive European realism which was so influential in Japan did not lead to the development of a similar genre in Indonesia. It was only in the late 1940s – and then through the American realist school – that writers in Indonesia began to use their own experiences in a directly autobiographical style in their first-person short stories and novels. Several writers were attracted to this new realism and the collective term Angkatan 45 – the Generation of 45 – is sometimes used for them. One of the most well known and the most successful of writers of this kind of realism was Pramoedya Ananta Toer who also elected to frame it in a genre of autobiographical fiction, though this was in no way, as far as I know, in imitation of the Japanese example.

²It is the same impulse which led Victorian women novelists to write autobiographical fiction, since this was the only creative literary manner in which an exploration of self was socially possible for them: 'As fiction the novels provide Bronte with a means of interpreting the experiences of her past without exposing her private self or violating social and theological taboos' (Peterson 1986: 132).

³There are several works which deal with Japanese autobiographical fiction to which the interested reader should refer: Fowler (1992) is a useful starting point but see also Hibbett (1955) and Eto (1964) and Walker (1979).

⁴Watson (1972: chp 2) suggests that one of the reasons why realism, popular as it was in European and American literature at the time, did not find echoes in Indonesia during the colonial period was the censorship both direct and indirect that the Dutch colonial government exercised.

In Pramoedya's early stories, those found for example in *Cerita dari Blora, Subuh* and the novella *Bukan pasar malam* – which as we shall see can be usefully compared to *Bako* – all of which are set in his natal home of Blora in central Java, a series of events and characters is sited within relatively specific temporal and spatial dimensions, since the recording of histories – personal, natural, regional – is paramount for the writer. And in relation to these several histories the device of the first-person narrator is crucially employed to establish a tension between the perceptions of the first-person and the scarcely detectable interventions of the narrator, a tension which is to be resolved only by the active participation of the reader negotiating between the two. This is precisely the type of narrative dynamic to which we are accustomed in accounts of the shifting 'I' in Western narrative tradition and the reader's response to it,⁵ and indeed which plays its part in the Japanese tradition.

The exploitation of the distance between narrator and protagonist in the description and unfolding of the personal history is, then, one of the similarities between Pramoedya's short stories and Darman Moenir's *Bako*. A further similarity is the emphasis placed in their stories on the understanding of the characters of significant others in the life of the child. Although, in the case of both writers, the narrative is ostensibly concerned with *aku* as a child, often it is not so much occasions specific to the life of the child which are recorded, but the events in the lives of those closest to *aku* as perceived and understood by him.⁶

For both Pramoedya and Darman Moenir, the intention is the evocation of the memories of childhood with all the sharpness and clarity they can muster. But that desire to be faithful to memory is subordinate to a further purpose, namely the creation of enduring images of the individuals who were dominant presences in the child's life. The writing for both of them deliberately takes on a memorialist function – the descriptions are obituaries, records that endure, resistant to the impermanence and weakness of fading memory. In the process, however, of recreating those images of childhood in the writing of the text, it is not only the diminishing power of memory which has to be restored and reanimated. The very trustworthiness of the memory itself needs to be reassessed. The narrator remembers with greater or lesser clarity specific scenes of childhood, and can recall the flawed understanding of the child of the events and personalities contained within the scenes. But then a decision must be reached: should the narrator, trusting the memory, simply represent those scenes as they are pristinely recalled, including a transparent account of what the child understood? Or should he, having reflected on the memory, comment on the child's understanding in the light of how he, the narrator, interprets those same occasions in hindsight. Both possibilities contain their own truth, and both strive to do justice to the integrity of the world of significant others.

The subtlety of the manner of that striving is what makes *Bako* such a remarkable example of Indonesian autobiographical fiction. Like Pramoedya, trying to do justice

⁵The critical issues of how we should respond as readers to reliable and unreliable narrators are familiar to us from Wayne Booth's classic analysis in *The rhetoric of fiction*.

⁶David Parker (2007: 101) in his cogent analysis of life narratives makes an important distinction, brilliantly put to critical use in his discussion of Seamus Heaney's poetry. He distinguishes between life narratives in which the trajectory of the life of 'I', the narrator, is central to the narrative and gives it a teleological character, and those narratives, which he terms 'relational intergenerational'. The latter have as their focus an examination of the relationship between the narrator and significant others, particularly family members of different generations. Pramoedya's, to some extent, and Darman's fictions, especially so, fall very neatly into this category and an understanding of this helps us to attend more finely to the writers' creative intentions.

to his childhood understanding of his mother and father, and evoking the strengths and weaknesses of their personalities in terms of their responses to him and to each other in the course of well remembered episodes,⁷ Darman Moenir, too, gives an account of his immediate family. Through description and commentary, but also through the balanced juxtaposition of different versions of reality articulated by the several voices of his narrative – narrator, child, reflective adult – he constructs for the reader a challenging autobiographical work in which that continual shifting of narrative perspective needs constantly to be attended to.

The structuring of the novel as autobiographical fiction

The opening sentence of *Bako* makes it clear that though we may read the novel as autobiography, we need not concern ourselves with that illusion of transparency common to most autobiographical narratives. The critical unlocking of the latter requires a demonstration of the disjunction between the ‘I’ of the narrator and the protagonist ‘I’ which, the autobiographer is suggesting – and herein lies the illusion of transparency – may be conflated into one within the imagination of the reader. The critic’s task here is to illustrate how the operation of consciousness affects the seeming innocence of the narration of the development of the protagonist. In other words, one needs to demonstrate that there is a conscious design underlying the shaping of the narrative and that, to put it as Gusdorf (1980: 41) does, the autobiography is inevitably flawed by the legacy of its original sin namely that of ‘logical coherence and rationalization’. Despite appearances the autobiographical narration is not artless but has been carefully contrived.

Within autobiographical fiction, however, this critical demonstration is redundant, since the work clearly announces itself as fiction and no illusion is pretended. The first sentence of *Bako* informs the reader that this is fiction. (*Biola tua itu kian hari kian berdebu. / ‘The old violin with each day that passed [passes] gathered [gathers] dust.’*) Despite the heading of the chapter ‘Ayah’, the reader is asked to consider an object, a violin gathering dust. Implicitly, a connection is going to be made between the object and the characters of the novel, but the nature of that connection is initially left open. The reader is left to ponder whether the violin is to function as symbolic metaphor, or object of comparison, or simply as a striking image which, because of its connotative associations, music, culture, faded gentility – it is dusty and has not been used for some time – establishes an appropriate contextual mood for the depiction of the characters which follows. Whatever the case, there is no doubt in the reader’s mind that this is a piece of literary craftsmanship and design and therefore fiction, not transparent descriptive writing, and so one would do well to observe the manner of narration as much as its ostensible content.

It is not till we get to the bottom of the page after a long description of the cupboard on which the violin lies, that the connection between the object and the person is made clear. And here again the device is ostentatiously literary, a rhetorical question: *Akan tetapi mengapa ayah sudah jarang, barang tidak menyentuhnya lagi daripada sepuluh tahun terakhir ini* (‘But why has father seldom, in fact not at all, touched it for these past ten years?’). It is a question which sets up the narrative which follows. Not only does it

⁷For some comment on the problems of interpreting the autobiographical reflections in these stories see Watson (1986).

provide succinctly the important information that we have to do here with the father of the narrator, that we shall be asked to consider a period of ten years in the past, but, more importantly, that what follows is an interpretation: there is a point here towards which an explanation is being directed and there is therefore within the narrative a specific closure.

Before that, however, the reader has also been alerted to another instance of style which is sufficiently prominent to suggest again what might be a characteristic of the narrative. Talking about the dust on the violin, the narrator writes: *Namun debu dimana-mana selalu saja memberi kesan tidak indah. Ia datang tidak diundang dan akan melekat di mana-mana. Dan debu yang melekat pada diri manusia akan melahirkan rohani yang tidak baik, barangkali.* ('But dust everywhere always gives an unattractive impression. It comes without invitation and sticks to everything. And dust which sticks to man will produce a spirit which is not wholesome, perhaps.'). Darman Moenir (1983: 11). The image of the dust has become the occasion for a rather trite metaphysical speculation, which is immediately qualified by the final word 'perhaps', the force of which is to indicate a certain spontaneity in the writing. The thought is not fully formed and emerges directly from the writing only to be immediately challenged.

This first page has worked to establish both tone and content through its structure – the image of the violin followed by a reference to the violin player – and through its technical style – the rhetorical question, the authorial interpolation of a half-hearted maxim. It is a type of rhetorical narrative style with which readers of Indonesian literature are readily familiar and here another instructive comparison can be made with Pramoedya's *Bukan pasar malam*.⁸ There, too, we encounter the same devices of physical imagery being related to individuals within the narrative leading to the formulation of a universal truth. In that book, for example, the all-night fair is associated with the dying father, and in turn that association prompts the comment – voiced, however, not by the narrator but one of the characters – that life is not an all-night fair (*bukan pasar malam*), the significance of which association is further emphasised by the book taking its title from that phrase. Like that book, too, *Bako* is imbued with a spirit of *triste reverie*, occasioned by nostalgic reminiscences of the past.

There are, however, important differences in these two autobiographical works. One of these is the function of narrator as protagonist in the recital. In Pramoedya's case the action of the novel takes place over a few days, although contained within the narrative are revelations and suggestions about the past. Furthermore, the narrator is central to the novel from the start, though paradoxically it is his observations rather than his self-revelation, which is primary within the novel. In *Bako*, however, the centrality of the narrator is deliberately disguised and of ambivalent status. Although the opening of the novel has established the literary genre according to the conventions of which the reader has to pursue her reading, what it has not done is to place the *aku* of the narrative within any sort of cognitive framework: that is, we do not yet know how knowledgeable *aku* is. This omission is quickly rectified in the scene which follows. The rhetorical question asking

⁸There is some comment on this in the introduction to the translation of *Bukan pasar malam* (Watson 2006). Perhaps in connection with a question often posed about how autobiographical such fictional autobiographies are (Spengemann 1980; Jay 1984), this is the place to note that in a conversation with Pramoedya I asked him exactly this about *Bukan pasar malam*, and he replied that it was pure autobiography, i.e. the events are related precisely as they occurred. Years later I had a similar conversation with Darman Moenir and he said that *Bako*, too, was completely autobiographical and seemed a little surprised that I needed to ask the question.

why there is dust on the violin – rhetorical because the writer-narrator knows the answer – is not so straightforward as it had appeared, and the answer to it, given in the narration of the past which follows, is not so archly contrived as appearances had suggested. The hint that the question might be a genuine one, and directed by the writer towards himself is suggested by the immediacy of the reminiscence which follows, which is shorn of interpretative comment and presented objectively and unreflexively, and at the same time the puzzle of the question in the narrator's mind is shown to be linked to other questions which perplex him. On this reading, the first question begins on reflection to seem less a device than an indication of the feelings of curiosity and uncertainty within the narrator – genuine exploration rather than teleology. The scene that is narrated has taken place some years previously but comes across with the intimacy of the present, an intimacy which enhances the description of the close relationship between father and son. The former returns home from school where he is a teacher, takes up his violin – and this of course is the link with the opening of the novel – and plays to the boy who listens enthralled.

In what follows this scene shifts abruptly when, in the manner of what appears to be free association, the narrator recalls another occasion in which father and son sit down together and the father recounts his history to his son. The bracketing of this account of his father's life within a remembered conversation between father and son some years in the past works upon the reader at several different levels. At the most visible level, the father's account of the past is simply a recording of the history of which the writer wants the reader to be in possession, in order to understand subsequent complications within the plot – an induction to the play as it were. At another level, the fact that it is the father recounting the past indicates a double reconstruction of that past. In the first place the father is selecting and interpreting what happened, and at a yet further remove there is the writer/son reconstructing what his father has said for his own dramatic authorial purpose. And finally, at a further level of analysis, the addressee of the father's account is the writer-narrator as boy whose perception of the situation at that time is not simply being reproduced but is being recreated and constructed through the writer.

As the account of this conversation develops, it becomes clear that the story being told by the father to the child is highly significant, since it relates to the latter's family origins, a matter which haunts the book and the narrator, and for which the writing of the novel provides a cathartic exorcism. It is in this section that for the first time one appreciates that this novel is not simply a recreation of the past, a form of memoir, nor would it appear to be confessional in terms of any justification or examination of self. What we see instead is that, through careful reconstruction and the selection and shaping of critical comments, an attempt is being made to render a sense of that past and come to some sort of accommodation with it. This writing is one of those autobiographical fictions which might be labelled self-fulfilling, in that the confrontation with the past and the creation of the role played by self within that past react upon the writer in the very act of writing by altering his version of himself.

The crucial passage about identity is this:⁹

⁹*Tidak beristeri dengan perempuan sekampung jelas merupakan suatu cacad-cela yang digunjingkan berkepanjangan oleh orang kampung. Tak dapat tidak! Dan ia berani menanggung resiko ini. Dan seperti kakekku, ia pun menikah dengan*

Not to marry a woman of the same village clearly constitutes a flawed action which will be the subject of endless calumny among the villagers. Without a doubt! And he dared to take the risk.

And like my grandfather, he, too, married a woman who was not of his village. And his children, as also the children of my grandfather, would not have their presence welcomed as those who were really of the village. That is the basis of families which operate a matrilineal system.

Thus in fact I am a son of the coast (*anak pantai*). However much I may crow that I am a son whose origins go back to the girdle of Mt. Merapi, in reality I'm not.

And now, as far as I'm concerned, origins and ancestry are not that important. I believe, really I do, that my presence as a man will be determined by me myself. And more than that, whatever I experience so long as I feel the rays of the sun, has been decided since I was forty days in my mother's womb. That is the certainty which has been soldered by my religion on to its people.

For the Minangkabau, endogamy within the village is preferred, hence the raised eyebrows which the father's marriage with someone outside the village elicits. An exogamous marriage has clear consequences for the children. The latter, as in any matrilineal system, are members of the mother's kin group and their mother's family house will be their home. If mother and father are of the same village then the children feel a double bond to the village. If, however, as is the case here, mother and father are from separate villages, then the children will only feel fully at home with their mother's kin. To their father's kin, the *bako* of the novel's title, they are more strangers than kinsmen, and although treated with respect they should not outstay their welcome.

An additional factor in this marriage, mentioned above, is that the mother comes from the coast (*pantai*) which is to be sharply distinguished from the hinterland (*darat*). Within Minangkabau ideology it is the latter which is considered the cradle of Minangkabau culture and values. The people of the coast are considered culturally inferior with diluted traditions and a more heterogeneous mixture of peoples. In remembering his father's marriage, then, the narrator appears regretfully to acknowledge that he is not a pristine Minangkabau, rather he is – through his mother – from the coast.

The importance of this passage lies in the way it introduces the problematic question of identity with respect to the hero's relationship with his *bako*. Ultimately the question is one which can only be understood and resolved by the hero, first of all in terms of understanding the general nature of the Minangkabau principles which operate within the society, and, next, by following through these principles as they affect the quality of the individual relationships which the hero forms with the major characters in the novel. If the first page of the novel has constructed a response from the reader in terms of a creation of mood and has set up expectations in relation to the development

perempuan yang bukan orang-kampungnya. Dan anak-anaknya, seperti juga anak-anak kakeku, tidak diterima kehadiran mereka sebagai asli di kampung itu. Begitulah asas dalam keluarga yang menjalankan sistem matrilineal. Sehingga dengan demikian sebenarnya aku adalah seorang anak pantai. Biar pun bagaimana aku berkaok-kaok, bahwa aku adalah anak yang berasal dari pinggang gunung Merapi, pada hakikatnya bukan.

Dan kini, bagiku asal dan keturunan, tidal terlalu penting. Aku percaya, sungguh-sungguh kehadiranmu sebagai manusia akan ditentukan oleh diriku sendiri. Dan lebih jauh lagi, apa-apa yang akan kutempuh selama bersintuhan dengan matahari, sudah ditentukan semenjak empat puluh hari di dalam kandungan ibu. Begitulah keyakinan yang dipatrikan oleh agamaku terhadap umatnya (Darman Moenir 1983: 14–15). I have provided the original text for some of the quotations in the article, especially in the case of passages that I felt were particularly significant, but considerations of space meant that some passages are only here in translation.

of the autobiographical style of the novel – self-revelation through the exploration of the past of significant others – this further paragraph now sketches out the elements of the plot by alerting the reader to the theme of personal angst which is to be developed in the course of the novel.

Furthermore, beyond simply stating the problem of identity the paragraph also prefigures the competing solutions that will become part of the narrator's dialogue with himself in the narration that follows – solutions which radically question the identity that the society appears to want to impose upon him, and which, by stressing individualism and religious authority, threaten the primacy of the community and its secular traditions. The narrator seems to be asserting his right to establish his own identity in opposition to that which the community ascribes to him. One alternative way to read this assertion may, however, be to perceive it in terms not of some new concept of individualism but as a form of resistance to those ideologies within the society which have always been the focus of opposition on the part of non-conformists.

Whatever one's reading here, whether it is to point to the emergence of a modern consciousness or to emphasise a continuity in resistance to dominant social ideologies – and both those readings depend on historical and anthropological reconstruction or recovery of the immediate Minangkabau past – the explicit claim of the narrator to be determining his own selfhood must be accepted at least as a claim. And as such, it is a claim which the narrator feels called upon to voice both as an affirmation of his autobiographical enterprise – and the task of self-exploration which the enterprise requires of him – and as an implicit challenge to those who would wish to deny the claim both now and also during the period of his growing up. It is, as we shall see, a claim which he feels compelled to reiterate throughout the narrative.

Paradoxically, however, at almost the very same time that this claim is made, a contrary notion is introduced which undermines that claim: namely that everything in a man's life is pre-determined. Surprisingly, this new idea is not perceived as contradicting the first one, but as extending it (*dan lebih jauh lagi* – and what is more). The idea derives from the narrator's belief in Islam, unmentioned up to the point, but strategically placed here as a conclusion to a general statement about the nature of man in order to underscore the importance which is attached to that belief.

Within the compass of these few sentences the shape of the writer's autobiographical consciousness has been definitively mapped. The revelation of self which is to be unfolded in the course of the narrative will be negotiated in the analysis of the encounters of the hero with significant others. However, those self-disclosures are only made possible and can only be articulated within a particular structural model used by the narrator to frame the episodic descriptions. Three explanatory concepts make up this model: a notion of what constitutes the lived reality of Minangkabau culture and organisation, a concept of the self as agent, and a set of religious beliefs. Although not necessarily incompatible in terms of explanation and guiding principles, they are in the text frequently considered separately and as alternatives, rather than complementary. With this in mind, one possible approach to the book is to see it as an examination by the protagonist, and through the representative characters, of each of the seemingly alternative explanations. In order to avoid the problems of over-generalisation which would arise if one simply dealt with these three principles as abstractions, the narrator directs them very specifically to the analysis of the three problematic issues of his life which constitute the source of his self-reflection and influence the whole of his

autobiographical memory: his mother's illness, his being a cripple and his living among his *bako*. The narrative consequently considers the explanatory power of each of the interpretative schemes, both to provide an explanation and offer a means to transcend the limitations that those three oppressive issues appear to impose on the hero.

Mother and son

The mother's illness, which, again, is described in the form of the narrator's memory of the father recollecting for the benefit of a young son, the family's immediate past history, took place when the child was still a baby and the mother was left on her own, in strange surroundings in her husband's village, while he went to work in a far distant town. She fell ill and never fully recovered her sanity. The medical explanation is that she suffered from a very high fever, but the narrator adds this comment.¹⁰

And it was only when I was on the point of adolescence that I knew that the illness she had suffered from was high fever. But other indications pointed to her inability to cope after being parted from her husband being the reason for her mind being unsettled ... Particularly since she was not in her own village but was living on sufferance in her mother-in-law's house. Living on sufferance in one's mother-in-law's house is not an easy situation to cope with, particularly in a community which is so critical, not to mention malicious.

This alternative explanation attributes the mother's illness to the psychological strain of being in an awkward social position, and here of course, there is a direct link to the narrator, because mother and son share the feeling of alienation from the husband/father's relatives. His mother's condition, unique as it is, is thus accommodated within the overall structural frame of the narrative where it serves to reinforce the general point being made of the way in which the culture of the society circumscribes or constrains behaviour, growth and development.

In the account of how he became a cripple there is a similar struggle to identify the causes of the suffering, this time concluding with religious resignation and again reaffirmation of self. The account begins with a relation of how *Man* ('aku') fell from a hammock as a baby, with the suggestion that it was the injury from the fall which led to him becoming crippled, and the further implication that it was the lack of attention of adults to the baby in the hammock which was originally responsible for the mishap. It is the father who relates the incident to the boy, and clearly the father has this suspicion. The version of events is, however, immediately questioned by the doctor's statement that the cause of the illness is polio. To the narrator, however, the cause is immaterial: 'Was it polio or an injury to a joint in my leg that hadn't healed, I didn't care, I still don't.' (*Apakah polio atau terkilir, aku tidak begitu hirau, sampai kini*; Darman Moenir 1983: 25). The point is not to dwell on the events but to make some sense of them and to see a way through them.

And here, unlike the case in relation to his mother's illness, the event cannot be interpreted in terms which derive from notions of what constitutes Minangkabau culture and so recourse is made to the other available explanatory model: religious belief. The sentence immediately following the one just quoted runs:

¹⁰Dan ketika sudah berangkat dewasa pulalah aku baru mengetahui, bahwa penyakit yang diidapkannya adalah demam-panas. Tapi indikasi lain mengatakan, ketidak-sanggupan untuk berpisah dengan suaminya merupakan penyebab jiwanya tidak tenteram ... Betapa lagi jika ia tidak pula berada di kampungnya sendiri, melainkan hidup menumpang di rumah mertuanya. Hidup menumpang di rumah mertua memang merupakan masalah yang tidak sederhana, betapa lagi di lingkungan yang demikian kritis jika tidak ingin disebut sinis (Darman Moenir 1983: 21).

There is one thing which needs to be accepted, like it or not: fate. If a person is indeed already fated to be either this or that, what can the person concerned do about it? Of course, as humans we must strive. But not every striving will bring about a good result, or will turn out exactly right.

(Darman Moenir 1983: 25)

Resignation of this kind can, however, lead to passivity, but such a consequence would be at odds with the concept of the self as a determining agent. Thus, here, the reference to this incident in the past is to be conceived within the structure of the narrative not as highlighting or foregrounding a crucial event in the life history which will take on further importance in the chronology of the narrative of later development. It should be considered more a paradigmatic case, an extreme example, of the way in which self-consciousness develops in the hero, and is confirmed in the remembrance and recounting by the narrator. He not only endorses the earlier perspective but draws strength and self-recognition from it. As one might have expected, therefore, the recounting of the episode ends with an affirmation:

Why should I feel regret or melancholy? Are not regret and melancholy useless emotions, as the poet writes? But, whatever the case, I strive (shall strive, have striven) to obtain some advantage and reality from the event as a beginning, a point of departure to give some meaning to the daily sun of my life and make it stronger.

(Darman Moenir 1983: 26)

Another reason for describing the origins of his limp at this point is that it both comes in the natural chronological order of the tale of the autobiography. The sequence is his father's meeting with his mother, their marriage, his departure, Man's birth, the mother's madness, the accident. And it explains the reason for what has become for mother and son the crucial event of their lives, the move to take up residence with the father's kin. On what the reader assumes to be the same occasion of confiding in the child and recounting the past, the father again provides an explanation and argues that it was a question of not wanting to burden his wife's relatives. If the burden of looking after wife and child had to be shared, he preferred to share it with his own kin. But the reader is subsequently informed by the narrator that links with the wife's family were not, however, severed and through regular, though infrequent, visits, the boy came to know his (matrilinal) kin.

For the boy becoming a man, the three major questions – his mother's illness, his own deformity and the residence among *bako* – have been answered, answered in a manner not fully comprehended at the time, but at least satisfactorily. Now as recollected by the narrator the lack of full comprehension is recognised, and that very recognition, bringing with it an understanding of how self-consciousness develops, contributes to a more profound analysis of self within the text. There is at this moment of self-awareness a critical slipping back into the character of narrator with an intervention which suspends the unfolding chronological narrative. The intervention is not a simple digression, but related quite crucially to themes of displacement and alienation, since there is a juxtaposing here of the experience of childhood, which mimics the passion of the child, against the wry reflection of an adult consciousness.

The mimetic gesture is contained in two short paragraphs:¹¹

¹¹*Kampung, biarpun di antara dua tanda petik, adalah kampung yang benar-benar gunung-gunung yang santun, pintu-pintu yang kumasuki tanpa diketuk, sawah berjenjang yang menyilaukan dan bumi subur yang setiap siang disinggahi matahari. Dan itulah sorga-masa-kecilku yang telah terpaku dalam batinku secara amat meyakinkan. Ingin saja aku*

The kampung even in inverted commas, is (was) a real kampung with its watchful mountains, its doors which I enter(ed) without knocking, the paddy fields in bright dazzling strips and the fertile soil on which the sun daily alighted.

And that is (was) the paradise of my childhood which has been fixed hard in my inner spirit and cannot be shaken, I want to go back there, to the narrow banks between the paddy fields which I walked on with sure steps. If that is not possible, let me simply think that that is what I rightfully own, my village-home which I long for.

Of course, even though the chronological narrative is suspended to permit this interpolation and the description transparently records the boy's feeling of delight, there is no question but that this mimetic gesture has been carefully mediated and filtered through the reflective consciousness. The joy and pleasure of being able to go into a house without having to knock first is surely an adult pleasure of which the child has not become conscious. This device of mimicry and the illusion of immediacy consequent upon it required some comment, since it compares so sharply and deliberately with the scene which follows.

What happens is that the chronological narrative is resumed, but the thematic link with the rhapsody on the village-home is developed in a way which, if it does not undermine the reverie and gesture towards fantasy, at least brings it quickly back to reality. A memory of one small particular episode in the boy's life is employed to interrogate the real nature of those apparently idyllic early years. The passage is too long to quote, but, in short, what is recounted – and it is stated specifically that the recounting of it is to qualify the notion of a wonderful childhood – is the bitterness of rejection of him by villagers. The incident recalled is when as a boy he had a fight with another boy. The latter complained to his grandmother who then abused the hero with a torrent of invective the principal taunt of which was that he was an outsider. The depth and intensity of the emotional hurt of the taunt is remembered and relived at some length. But beyond the hurt which it brings to the boy, and to the narrator in recollection – ‘and till now what she said is engraved deep in my heart’ – the recognition of his status as interloper evokes memories of how his father and his father's sister (who plays such an important structural role within the Minangkabau family) coped with the difficulties of the situation, and the chapter ‘Ayah’ ends rapidly with a brief description to carry forward the chronicle of the autobiography.

The language of self-reflection

One of the delights of *Bako* is the careful structuring of the narrative. We have already seen the way in which it is split into five sections each bearing the name of a significant other in the childhood hero. Each of these sections is principally concerned with that individual, or rather with that individual's special relationship to the hero. Ostensibly the narrative does not proceed in straightforward chronological development: it would appear to be less an account of growing up than an impression of boyhood structured round crucial relationships with adults. Yet, almost imperceptibly woven into that

berbalik ke sana, ke pematang-pematang sawah yang kulangkahi dengan lompatan yang pasti. Kalau tidak mungkin, biarlah aku menganggap, bahwa ia adalah milikku yang sah, kampung-halamanku yang kurindukan (Darman Moenir 1983: 27).

frame, there is another text which does in fact narrate the growth of the boy into adolescence and early manhood. Part of the reason why this secondary text remains almost hidden is because the implicit tense of the narrative is past continuous: what the writing seems to record is not so much a succession of events in the past, but typical, recurring, past experience. The illusion is built up of a static past in which the sections are perceived as overlapping, leaving layer upon layer of remembered vision upon one temporal frame. The narrator employs a multi-dimensional perspective on the experience of the hero with a focal lens always manipulated by the boy-hero/narrator but with the camera successively swinging off into a different direction to create through multiplication a sense of totality.

A proper sense of chronology only occasionally breaks into the narrative as a consequence either of the frequent authorial interjections commenting on an event – and here the intention is to confirm the autobiographical status of the writing, or at least to create that illusion of an immediate recording of reality spontaneously remembered and assessed in the present. Or by the occasional supplying of information which makes it clear that the hero is, despite the static description, growing up and passing from childhood to adolescence. The imparting of that information is, however, so casual, so unremarked upon, that it remains more of a sub-text, and, quite clearly, secondary to that recording of an ever present and constantly recycled past, recycled both in the repetition of the experience and in the memory of the narrator.

The way in which the resources of Indonesian syntax are exploited to create this temporal ambivalence is cleverly exemplified in the second section of the book entitled 'Ibu'. The opening sentence runs *Masih teramat subuh ketika ibunya sudah terbangun dan sengaja bangkit dari tidurnya* (Darman Moenir 1983: 32). A reasonable translation of this sentence would be: 'It was still very early in the morning when my mother awoke and deliberately got up from her sleep.' It would also be acceptable to translate the sentence into the historic present to recreate some sense of the temporal proximity of the Indonesian: 'It is still very early in the morning when mother has awoken and deliberately risen from sleep.' However one deals with the matter of tense in the English, it is clear from the Indonesian that what the reader must perceive here – what she is being introduced to – is the narration of one particular event. The use of the collocation *ketika ... sudah* (when ... already) indicates this, and the sentences which follow employing further temporal indicators, *belum sudah*, confirm it. However, because there is no direct reference to historical time, no phrase of the kind, 'once when I was small', 'not long after we had moved to my father's village', as there are at other points in the narrative, the reader is reduced to reading the description as being of an event occurring in the present, awareness of authorial manipulation being suspended, as for example in listening to an English story which begins: 'I'm in the Post Office and a man comes up to me ...'.

This illusion of immediacy continues for one or two paragraphs describing the mother carefully leaving the house and going out in the dark to the stream but then it is abruptly abandoned with a sentence which reads: *Di pincuran ia belum akan menemui siapa-siapa*. ('At the communal washing place with the bamboo water pipe she would not have met anyone.'). The phrase *belum akan* instead of the simple *tidak* ('not' – thus 'she did not meet anyone', or 'does not meet anyone') pushes the narrative once more within the continuous past and re-invokes the narrator's authority – he knows that she never meets anyone at that time – thus subtly compelling the reader to reevaluate

the reading of the first few paragraphs. That it is a regular, typical episode that is being recalled, and not one which is in any way unique is further confirmed by the dialogue which follows which serves to reinstate the presence of the hero to the reader at the same time as it creates a sense of the past.

‘Why, mother, do you get up so quickly and always go to the water pipe?’ I once asked.
(Darman Moenir 1983: 32)

And the opening question serves to introduce the critical focus of the chapter which is the relationship between the boy and the mother, a relationship characterised by the way in which the boy is constantly trying to make sense of his mother’s behaviour and her words. This is done within the immediate context of a particular episode or event, which is at the same time typical of the mother; and, at another remove, the narrator is trying through reflexion to locate and place the events and the boy’s memory of them within a more general explanatory framework. As we have seen, the most psychologically satisfying explanation for the narrator lies in the uncomfortable position forced upon his mother and himself by their residing among the *bako*, and it is this explanation to which recourse is made here. On being questioned by her son why she behaves as she does she says *Kita bukan orang sini* (‘We [inclusive of the son] are not from here’) and the narrator, speaking of the boy, comments ‘*Aku paham sekali. Bukan orang sini yang ia maksudkan kumaklumi, ia tidak merasakan keenakan hidup dikampung suaminya lagi* (I understand clearly. The ‘not from here’ which she meant I understand: she did not feel comfortable living in her husband’s village.). And later when the boy asks where the home is, the mother replies *Entahlah ... Mengapa aku dibawa ke sini? Padahal kita bukan orang sini*. (‘I don’t know ... Why was I brought here? We’re not from here.’)

This is all the information that the boy can elicit from his mother, yet clearly, although it is at one level satisfactory, the boy feels that he wants to understand more: why is it that being in her husband’s village has tipped his mother over the edge of sanity? It is the following through of this further question in this section which enables the narrator to pursue the process of self-discovery.

In the first chapter the crucial events of his mother’s madness, of his becoming a cripple and of moving to take up residence among the *bako*, were represented and reflected upon through a narrative style which objectified and described the past as a set of facts. It was a question of identifying and setting down for the reader what had happened. Even though that account was largely made available through the father’s piecemeal retelling to the boy, that account and the boy’s reflections upon it, introductory as they are, receive privileged status within the context of the book. True, alternative explanations have been given in relation to the causes of the events, but the effect of this frequent mentioning of the issues up to this point has simply been to enhance the significance of the events themselves in the life of the narrator.

In the boy’s questioning of his mother there appears to be continuity in the probing of the mystery, repetition it would seem, but in fact the status of the past in the course of the chapter is displaced from the centre of the narrative, and there is a gradual shift of focus away from the mother on to the boy. Whereas the boy in the first chapter is described as young and not fully understanding, essentially a passive listener to his father’s tale, with the narrator emphasising that passive role by commenting on the boy’s reactions, in this second chapter the boy has grown up and matured. A consequence of that growing up is

a self-assertiveness marked by a rejection of what in boyhood would have been regarded as an authoritative, reliable statement, and the boy begins increasingly to speak with the voice of the narrator. The progression in self-awareness is especially clearly signalled in his relationship with *nenek* (his mother's mother).

Initially *nenek* appears to function in the narrative like the boy's father, as a source of information about the past. As herself a narrator or, as it turns out, a tale-teller, and on this occasion, she supplements the boy's knowledge with a story of how, when the mother was left alone, while the father worked away from home, rumours had reached the village that he was having an affair with another woman. It is implied that the mother was very upset by this, and the further implication is that the first hint of madness lay here. But, almost immediately, *nenek* denies this and offers a counter-explanation. *Tetapi nenek kira, ibukau memang mendapat penyakit maruyan.*¹² *Penyakit ini sebetulnya sudah merupakan penyakit turun-temurun. Ibu Nenek pernah pula mendapatnya. Tetapi tidak bera- kibat seperti ibukau* ('But I think that your mother suffered from post-natal depression. It is an illness that passes down through the generations. My mother suffered from it, but not like your mother.'; Darman Moenir 1983: 37).

Here, then, is another piece of the jigsaw in the reconstruction of the past, and the passage ends: *Apakah dengan demikian sudah lengkap awal dari kegilaan yang ditanggungkan ibuku?* (ibid.) ('So did this [information] now complete the picture of the beginning of the madness which my mother suffers (suffered) from?'), and it is unclear whether this is the voice of boy or narrator.

The exact nature of the relationship with the grandmother is made clear in a bald statement describing the move of *aku* to the town of P (*scilicet* Padang) to further his education: 'Going to school in P., I did not stay in my grandmother's house. Besides the fact that it was far away, I wasn't particularly close to her and what's more I didn't feel there was anything grandmotherly about her.'

The completion of his disillusionment with his grandmother comes when she tells him another tale, this time alleging that his mother dragged him across the floor in a frenzy when he had fallen from his hammock. But, startled as he is by her account, he is sceptical and rejects this version of events. He concludes that his grandmother is deliberately trying to set him against his mother and this irritates him. It is not, says the combined voice of the hero/narrator, that he wants to attach blame, simply that he wants to know about the background to his early life.

It is clear, however, that this quest for knowledge about the past has, during adolescence, been intensified as consequence of a greater sense of closeness to and intimacy with his mother, which both prompts his desire to know more and is strengthened by the knowledge which he acquires. Knowledge provides access to her, an access all that more desired, because, isolated in her madness, the mother is seemingly unreachable through ordinary domestic relationships.

How we are intended to interpret the boy's growing attachment to his mother is, however, obscured by the structure of the text. The second chapter, 'Ibu', stresses the mother-son connection in just the same way as the first chapter played on the relationship between father and son, thus there is the expectation that the focus will be upon a dyadic relationship. Furthermore, given the point made earlier that there is temporal

¹²The term *maruyan* comes from the root word *ruyan* or *royan* meaning a post-natal illness.

overlap which allows a textual layering, one would expect the two dyadic relationships to be presented serially, rather than simultaneously. This would account for the absence of the father in the second chapter. On closer reading, however, this interpretation will not stand up. In the first chapter, despite the presence of the father and his crucial role as narrator to the boy, the mother, although never directly present, is the object at the centre of the stories created by the narrator and the characters of the drama. It is precisely because she is so physically absent from and yet so central to the first chapter that she must be made so visible in the chapter which follows. Her presence can be deferred no longer.

Furthermore, despite the device of layering, there is, as suggested above, a crucial passage of time being constantly marked in the text. Significantly, however, it is only noticeable in relation to the hero. While the adults continue to share an atemporal space in which there are no indications of ageing, indeed no historical parameters whatsoever relating that microcosm either to a specific temporal dimension or linking it to a world beyond the village, the boy is described as progressing through school, acquiring certain skills and moving away from home. The reader is then forced to acknowledge through the explicit signalling, a growth in the mental awareness, social consciousness and self-perception of the boy. In no other area is this so clearly indicated as in his relationship with his mother. If, in the first chapter, the suggestion made explicit in the final passage was that the hero's angst derived from the insecurity of living in an alien environment, this anxiety is now recognised and developed in the second chapter, where the boy, seeking desperately to establish some sort of individual identity for himself in these alien surroundings turns to his mother with whom he is allied in opposition through kinship – a fact which his mother, mad as she is, recognises through her use of the inclusive *kita* (we): *kita bukan orang sini*.

This becomes clear at various points in the narrative. The first instance occurs when the hero is still a boy. He pesters his mother to give him some money to buy sweets. Previously she had never given money to anyone, guarding closely what she had, but on this occasion the boy is successful, appearing to have broken through the mother's madness to her maternal instincts. And from that point on, although giving to no one else, she gives to him. The episode is for the boy a significant dawning, not only for his mother's awareness of her son, but for his own understanding of the primacy of the relationship with his mother. As the narrator/autobiographer recollects the memory – distancing himself therefore from the voice of the boy – the immediate thought is: 'Was this a sign that she really had a love for me or was it simply the result of my whining?' and this is followed by the answer *Ternyata ia memang mencintaimu* ('It seemed she did love me'; Darman Moenir 1983: 36). And this recognition of her affection prompts him to reciprocate by wishing to show a sense of responsibility towards her, a responsibility which he can only discharge by becoming more involved with her and learning about her – *Mengetahui suasana begini, aku ingin membuka tabir rahasia yang menyebabkan ibunya sampai mendapat sakit jiwa* ('Knowing that this was the situation. I wanted to draw back the curtain on the secret which had caused my mother to fall mentally ill'; *ibid.*).

The awareness of a responsibility towards his mother is an emotion which grows and develops and is expressed in different forms parallel to the hero's own growth to maturity. This is strikingly brought out in a later episode when the mother meets her son in *nenek's* house in P. where he is now at school. It is a particularly moving encounter

for the boy, because for a moment his mother's madness seems to slip away as she questions him about his welfare in a way which is sane and normal, a mother enquiring with concern about her son.

The passage deserves quoting in full and because of its poignancy.

... Di mana kautinggal di P., Man? tanya ibuku dengan ramah di rumah nenek. Kuketahui keberadaannya di sana dari seorang kampungku yang baru saja datang.

Di P.M., jawabku jujur.

Sendirian?

Bukan, jawabku dengan penuh keharuan. Bukankah amat langka ia bisa berhandai-handai seperti ini. Atau, apakah sekarang ia sudah pulih, kembali normal?

Entah mengapa tiba-tiba aku berlinang air-mata. Aku menjadi seorang yang sentimental. Ini kusadari kemudian. Dan aku jadi malu ketika nenek mengetahui, bahwa aku berduka. Tetapi juga aku bukan berduka. Aku mungkin gembira. Tetapi nenek tidak pula bertanya apa-apa.

Boleh aku ke sana?

Boleh saja, Bu, jawabku sambil menatapnya. Ia tertawa. Aku hari itu mengajaknya ke tempat-tinggalku dengan hati mendua. Sungguh, hatiku tiba-tiba mendua. Apakah tidak cukup memalukan, atau apalah namanya; jika diketahui oleh sahabat-sahabatku, bahwa ibuku sakit saraf? Ada perang di batinku. Tetapi kemudian ia menolak.

Malu kita, bukankah Ibu gila? tanyanya. Ulu-hatiku kembali tersembilu. Aku berkeras-keras mengajak, tetapi ia tetap saja menolak. Ajakan itu kupertegas sesudah berhasil mendamaikan perang di batinku.

Besok sajalah, malu kita, Man. Ia berkata pasti.

Ibuku banyak memendam perasaan malu. Ia malu datang ke tempatku mungkin saja untuk menjaga harga-diriku supaya jangan diejek sahabat. Ini anggapan keliru. Sedikit pun aku tidak malu membawanya ke sepanjang jalan hidupku. Suatu kesadaran yang memang kuperoleh kemudian. Bukankah ibu hanya seorang di atas bumi? Tidak pernah ada gandanya.

(Darman Moenir 1983: 47)

... Where do you stay in P., Man? asked my mother making a friendly enquiry. She was in grandmother's house, and I knew she was there from a fellow villager who had just arrived.

In P.M., I replied truthfully.

By yourself?

No, I replied with great emotion. It was very rarely that she was able to be friendly like this. Or was she now recovered, was she normal again?

I don't know why. Suddenly my eyes were full of tears.

I had become a sentimental person. This I realised later. And I became embarrassed that my grandmother might think that I was sad. But I wasn't sad. Perhaps I was happy. But my grandmother didn't ask anything.

May I come there?

Yes, you may, mother, I replied looking at her. She laughed. That day I was inviting her to my house with mixed feelings. Yes, suddenly I had mixed feelings. Wouldn't it have been embarrassing or whatever, if my friends knew that my mother was not right in the head? There was a conflict inside me. But then she refused.

We'd be ashamed; your mother's mad, isn't she? she asked. I felt my heart cut with a razor. I invited her again and again, but she persisted in her refusal. I pressed my invitation, after succeeding in laying to rest my inner conflict.

Another time. We'd be ashamed, Man. She spoke determinedly. My mother often suppressed feelings of shame. She was ashamed to come to my house perhaps to protect me from being ridiculed by my friends. It was a mistaken assumption. I am (was) not the slightest bit ashamed to take her along with me wherever my life might lead. This was indeed something I became aware of later. Do we not have only one mother on this earth? No other.

This then is another significant moment in his coming to maturity, a moment which both marks another stage in his growing perception of himself, and indicates a shift in the way he relates to his mother. But there is no sense of culmination or finality here. Explicitly, he remarks that understanding came later after the experience, and, implicitly – through the very fact of the book having taken shape in his mind – the writer's creation of the narrator in the text moves the self-understanding one stage further.

The final sector of the chapter ends with what is for the boy a moving scene involving the mother, the father and the boy. After the end of an unusual day in which mother and son have returned together to the village from Padang with the mother's odd behaviour manifesting itself in several different ways, the father picks up the violin to play to himself and, the boy suspects, to his wife. This is the same violin which had been the subject of the opening sentence of the book, and its reappearance here echoing that opening must be read as concluding a definitively marked section, and finally answering the questions to which it gave rise, questions not only of the identifying and situating of past events but also questions of interpretation, the answers to which offer a resolution of the present.

This final passage, then, does suggest something of a resolution, not complete, nor yet in any way triumphal, but a resolution of qualified optimism. As the father plays, and as the music becomes more emotionally charged, the boy is carried away by the tranquillity and the beauty of the scene, but the reality of his mother's condition pulls him away from the repose of the moment, and from his vicarious pleasure at his father's untroubled serenity.

Entalah, kata ibuku sekali lagi, sambil tertawa juga. Dan ini terdengar oleh suaminya.

(Darman Moenir 1983: 55)

I don't know, said my mother again, laughing at the same time. And my father heard.

But the father is not disturbed and can accommodate this apparent discord within the tranquillity of the moment and within his own large vision of life. He looks directly at his wife, and she returns his look with a smile – *I felt very happy, my father had obtained peace through his music, through the gaze of his wife*. It is a small victory, but not a victory forced upon the three of them through simple resignation. It is a victory for which they have fought and for which they will continue to fight, where the necessary limitations on success put a curb on any sense of rejoicing, but it is a rare culminating moment of complete awareness, mutual understanding and profound love.

The conclusion to the chapter brings to a close that enquiry into the past on which the boy set out. The first chapter had concerned itself with the identification of the issues and the quest to pinpoint historically the events which led up to his mother's illness and the removal of the family to the village of the *bako*. The second chapter developed the enquiry further, seeking this time to interpret the crucial events through the perspective both of the growing adolescent and the narrator himself. This ultimately led to a reckoning with the past which weighed, assessed, then assimilated, permits the hero to move forward from a position of the possession of knowledge to a future which he will determine for himself. The next chapter 'Umi' marks the reorientation of the hero's life to a world outside the confines of family and village into which he is able to enter, only because he feels sufficiently strongly rooted in a sense of a past, however disturbed that past may have been.

Seeking and learning

Understanding of his mother's background and her present condition, though it creates a version of himself which allows him to proceed does little to assist with the persisting difficulty of her madness. The same applies to the difficulty of living with the *bako*. Although the situation is now properly understood and the circumstances situated and defined in a way which no longer impedes the boy, everyday problems fraught with the social and cultural tensions inherent within them remain, if not acute, at least troublesome. In the chapter about Umi, however, these tensions remain dormant, since the resolution which has been possible at the level of conceptualisation allows the hero to shake off the obsession of origin, and, in a new geographical and mental environment, embark upon a period of self-testing. The mood is one of growing confidence, pride and assertiveness, developing as a consequence of the discovery that there is for him scope for individual action untrammelled by the past. It is his modest success with creative writing which introduces him into a new wider world peopled by writers whose national stature he vicariously enjoys through his knowledge of them.¹³ The litany-like almost magical invocation of their names by the narrator recovers and revives the excitement of those years of discovery: a direct reproduction of the moment. Through this simple knowledge of their names, he acquires both for himself and in the eyes of the reader a new status which removes him at once from the restrictive locus of the village.

It is no coincidence that this description of 'glad, confident morning' should be contained in the chapter (Darman Moenir 1983: 56–76) given over to Umi, the father's sister and – as determined by the matrilineal principles of the Minangkabau world – the head of household. This is not simply because she is instrumental in giving him encouragement and providing him with funds to pursue his education but because she magnificently represents in both her attitudes and her actions much of this brave new world into which the boy enters. Of all the adult characters in the book she is the strongest and most self-possessed, dwarfing the other figures in her household. And this status

¹³It can be noted in passing that this sense of being a member of a community of writers is important, too, for Sitor Situmorang and Nh. Dini writers of fiction who have also written autobiographies (Watson 2000: chps 6 and 7). They both stress in their autobiographies how much this membership of an artistic community meant to them, since it took them into a different cultural world from that they had been accustomed to.

that she holds not only within the household but in the village in general, derives not from her ascriptive position in the community but, as the text of the narrator stresses, from her own accomplishments. It is she who is responsible for the finances of the household, as one might expect, and it is she who reaches the decisions concerning rights of residence. In addition, her vision is not confined to the village. She was at one time an active member of the Masjumi, the modernist Islamic political party, which, in its heyday, actively promoted an engagement in the world of politics and commerce and an orientation away from the traditions of village life in the direction of matters related to the modern nation-state.

The brief description of Umi at the commencement of the chapter provides an unconscious model for the boy's engagement with the world, and her direct encouragement confirms the worth of the enterprise. However, there is a certain uneasiness about the writing at this point. It arises not out of a deliberately evoked ambivalence of the kind noticeable at the end of the second chapter, but, on the contrary, precisely because there appears to be no perspective of self-critical ambivalence, so that the resolution in favour of an active religious commitment seems too glibly and easily achieved.

In the confrontation between Umi and the boy she chides him mildly for being insufficiently religious and for deserting his faith. He defends himself loudly saying that his views have not changed but that he is sometimes lax in the practice of his religious duties. She presses her point arguing that laxity is an indication of weakness of faith. Finally, he capitulates to her argument ... *karena belum mengetahui hakikat beragama itulah agaknya aku sering abai. Barangkali dengan jalan memahaminya terlebih dahulu aku harus berangkat, untuk kemudian menjadi pemeluk.* ('... because I didn't know the essence of faith, that was why I often neglected my religious duties. Perhaps in order to understand it, I should have set out first [on my own], so as to become later a proper believer'; Darman Moenir 1983: 75). The setting out, it appears, was flawed from the outset. Although observing Umi's strength, there had been a critical failure to perceive that the strength grew out of religious conviction, a failure which is now remedied, and again the consequence of this is the reaching of a narrative closure.

The process of creating is possibly expensive. But it's not that it doesn't exist. And to obtain it, I would appear to need to give body to my feelings and thoughts with a knowledge of things of the world and things of religion. In fact, a knowledge of things of religion would be sufficient itself. Because within it is contained worldly problems. And here it seems had been my mistake. Only to consider worldly issues.

(Darman Moenir 1983: 76)

It is a resolution of a kind, an indication of another confident beginning, this time grounded in religious commitment, but it is a resolution too easily won, with no sense of that inner struggle which characterised the earlier venturing out. That the experience is, despite the explicit suggestion to the contrary, an unsatisfactory one, is betrayed by the final metaphor:

It was as if I had been beaten with a terrible whip before finding and setting out on my tomorrow and pursuing the world I had chosen.

(Darman Moenir 1983: 76)

There is no warm embrace of religion here, rather the shuddering acceptance of an obligation.

The getting of wisdom

If it is a consciousness of religious faith as a complement to worldly knowledge that is impressed upon him by his confrontation with Umi, it is yet another kind of knowledge which is learned from Bak Tuo, the father's elder brother, and subject of the fourth chapter. The latter is remarkable for the degree of contrast it emphasises between Bak Tuo's character and that of Umi. He represents all that she is opposed to: neglect of religion, idleness, waste of resources, thieving, gambling. And, certainly, 'represents' is the correct word here, since more than any other character in the novel he comes closest to standing for a recognisable Minangkabau type, the irreligious good-for-nothing, the bane of the family, constantly exploiting their generosity. And yet precisely because this is autobiographical fiction, and so heavily dependent on the illusion of realism and the convention of transparent reproduction, the temptation to caricature is resisted, and the individuality of the man is finely articulated. The articulation is very carefully controlled through the modalities of the narrative and the clever manipulation of the several voices of *aku*.

The chapter opens with the boy's memory of an incident in which Bak Tuo stole some of his father's money and a violent quarrel erupted in the house. The boy shares his father's anger at the theft, yet, a few days later, is surprised to see that Bak Tuo and his father have made up the quarrel. The boy – not the narrator – comments: *I didn't understand at all*. To the boy with only a rudimentarily developed moral conscience, the issue is clear: the theft is a great sin and should be punished. He admits, too, that perhaps his father should have given his uncle some money, but that does not detract from the enormity of the latter's sin.

At a later unspecified period of his life the boy once more muses on his uncle's failings, and this time the uncle is perceived not in the light of a single incident but as thoroughly corrupted by a way of life, an addiction to gambling, which can only serve as an example of 'that way perdition'. There is still an air of moral priggishness, but the reflection, again the boy's not the narrator's, ends with the comment *Aneh sekali (It was very strange)*, suggesting the glimmering of an understanding that the circumstances were not open to easy judgements.

The final move towards a more mature appreciation of the uncle is prompted by the example of Umi. After the boy has tried to remonstrate with his uncle who rebuffs him with the comment that it is not appropriate for him to lecture his uncle, he turns to Umi, but she replies that the matter should be dropped. There is no point in persisting. They must simply pray for him and be resigned. And the boy comments: *My Umi was probably wiser than me in this matter*. And this recognition of Umi's wisdom is the beginning of the getting of his own, suggesting as it does the development of a moral perceptiveness which derives not from second-hand learning or from books but from experience and sensibility.

This awareness of a new type of knowledge, signalled by the word *kearifan* (wisdom), is confirmed at the end of the chapter. In just the same way as the previous chapters closed on some achievement of understanding and a rejection of earlier types of knowledge, so the chapter on Bak Tuo, too, closes with an illumination. A telling confrontation takes place in a conversation between Bak Tuo and the boy, and begins with his uncle telling him that he must be a man (*Kau harus menjadi jantan*) and then, in response

to the boy's question, explaining what that means. At one level the explanation could have been read as the rather sententious ramblings of a character whose foibles have led the reader to distrust him, but located here at the end of the chapter, echoed as they are by a figure of representative status, it is clear that they are to be taken seriously.

Up to this point in the novel, *adat*, the source of traditional practice, and its representatives, the villagers who despise the boy for not being of them, have been forthrightly rejected in order both to legitimise the latter's sense of self-respect, and also because the alternative modes of knowledge, through modern education and religion, seem far superior in terms of making sense of the world. Here, however, for the first time in the presentation of the *adat* view, a chord is struck to which the boy is responsive; and he is able to be responsive, it should be said, only because of the cumulative effect of the other kinds of learning upon his self-perception. The word which Bak Tuo emphasises is again *kearifan* and the explanation of the concept, hanging on the Minangkabau saying *Lamak dek awak katuju dek urang* (*What you find pleasant, others are going to like as well* [or *Do as you would be done by*]), indicates that what is being argued for is a greater sensitivity to the complexity of inter-personal relationships. It is a concept which, as the boy puts it, he does not fully grasp, yet which has a resonance in his innermost self, and the shock of this recognition of something so vitally important disturbs him. It is a moment of revelation of much greater emotional intensity than the capitulation to religion, and the irony of it, as he notes, is that the person to prompt this moment of understanding is his uncle.

The chapter ends with two rhetorical questions: 'Why did [have] I only come late to an understanding of wisdom? Was it not always there in the surroundings?' Again, one sees here the recognition of a milestone: the implication of the question indicates a degree of self-perception, the capacity to reflect on earlier experience and to see it comprising qualitatively different moments of understanding, each associated inextricably with the personalities of significant others. At the same time there is a confession and recognition that until that point, what had been taken as final, is capable of being subsumed within other conceptions of self. And, second, has come the realisation that what had been very early on rejected, turns out to have a value, the recognition of which leads to self-condemnation for stupidity. It is this new awareness of the significance of the immediate geographical, moral and social surroundings which becomes the object of analysis in the final chapter that is centred upon a character, who, even more than Bak Tuo, embodies the permanence of the traditional community in the imagination of the narrator.

Yet, curiously, Gaek (the old man, grandfather) is also an outsider, as the boy discovers. This old man who resides in the house, and had appeared to the boy to represent such an established part of the atmosphere of the *bako* – 'He was the man who gave substance to my childhood more perfectly.' – is someone who has been taken in by Umi and given a place there. Like the boy, it transpires, he is there, not as of right, but through the generosity of Umi. This discovery leads again to a questioning of what it is that constitutes *adat*, which through its identification in the boy's imagination with Gaek, now appears through the disclosure of Gaek's real identity to be open to the same ambivalence of interpretation as the character of Gaek himself, and it is this line of questioning which the boy pursues.

In continuity with the other chapters in the book, the account of Gaek begins with a description of an experience remembered from childhood, an experience which is both a single incident, and yet representative of a generality, an ontological confusion made eminently possible as I have suggested earlier by the grammar of the language which lends itself to temporal ambiguity. The experience here described is of going with Gaek to the annual horse races in a distant town, and what is recalled in the description is both the particularities of the occasion and the kindnesses of Gaek.

In the crucial passage which follows on from this, Umi explains Gaek's origins and how he was taken into the house and how she made him one of the family. And while Umi explains not only the circumstances of Gaek's life, but his present position within the family and his understanding of himself as a person who knows that he is an incomer (*orang-datang*) but, nonetheless, sees no reason for shame in that, the boy sees something of himself. Indeed, the parallels seem so great that he wonders whether beneath Umi's words there is a hidden critical reference (*sindiran*) to himself. He concludes, however, that what she is trying to do is to help him understand himself, and here again he recognises her wisdom: 'Wisdom which it seems had already become a nerve whose root lay deeply embedded in the way of life of this village.' In Umi's account of Gaek and its immediate applicability to the boy we are confronted again with the two interrelated questions which have run through the book, the significance to be attached to the primacy of origins, and the knowledge and understanding required to place that significance within a relative evaluation and thereby to transcend it. And here it is stressed that Umi is not expressing any simple cliché nor any received wisdom

... my Umi did not make an issue of whether he was a newcomer or not, whether his antecedents were clear or not. Nor did she make an issue of adat being based on syariah law, and syariah being based on the book of God. Kemenakan being obedient to mamak and mamak being obedient to adat. There was no problem.

(Darman Moenir 1983: 97)

The issues which have perplexed his childhood have, then, been resolved both emblematically in the figure of Gaek and practically through the wisdom of Umi who reiterates that origins (*asal-usul*) are not what is important. A doubt remains whether Umi's attitude is universally shared by others in that environment, but in response to them the boy will argue: *What if one's origins are indeed clear, but one isn't educated?*

In the final scene in the book, there is once more, as characteristic of the scenes of closure we have already noted, a highly particularised memory of a single occasion; Gaek goes out to the *sawah* very early in the morning to see the irrigation channel is flowing properly. There he comes across the boy's mother also there to see to the water. When he asks her what she is doing she replies in her usual strange way and goes off leaving Gaek puzzling over her behaviour. At first sight this seems a loose ending with the character of the hero remote from what passes, but for the reader now familiar with the mother and Gaek and their significance for the boy, the conventions of the structure of the novel and the clear echoes of the conclusion to the second chapter allow this last scene to be read not as an expression of anguish but as the measured harmony of hard-won understanding.

The central angst-laden question posed in *Bako* concerns the possibility of authentic being in Minangkabau society when that possibility is threatened from the outset by

possessing only marginal status within the community. To be brought up and to assert some sort of selfhood in the village of one's *bako* creates from the start a dilemma, since, for the Minangkabau, authenticity is only generated through the constant affirmation of the child's notion of self, reiterated and acknowledged in the context of the maternal village. The novel in this respect must be read as a resolution of that dilemma, since it creates through argument and reflection alternative interpretations of authentic being for the Minangkabau man.

Put in this way the hero's particular circumstances – the fact that he is a cripple and that his mother is mentally disturbed – are incidental to this central question of marginality. Marginality, and with it of course the definition of authentic being, is derived from *asal-usul*. It is the early recognition of the significance of *asal-usul* that has led the boy to explore its implications and consider the three alternatives to it: *pendidikan* (education), *agama* (religion) and *kearifan*. After each of the confrontations, the primacy of *asal-usul* and its acceptability as a criterion of authentic being is damagingly fractured, and yet not at the cost of dismantling the whole edifice of Minangkabau culture and social organisation. The representative characters of the novel who collectively embody Minangkabau ideals are shown in themselves to be repositories of the three alternative sources of interpretation, which can therefore be said to be assimilable within Minangkabau culture and reflective of it. In the final analysis, then, it was the attribution of paramountcy to notions of *asal-usul* at the beginning which is seen to be flawed, but there is a parallel recognition that this superior knowledge has only been achievable through the writing of the novel.

At the level of surface appearances, the novel is about a community and representative individuals within it, particularly as they are observed by the *aku* of the novel. But, patently, the novel moves quickly below this surface, since the reader immediately recognises that the selection of representative individuals has, in ways described above, been determined by the degree to which ego's relationships with them – both in terms of reciprocal rights and obligations, and a more personal inter-action – contribute both to ego's growth and development and conform to the narrator's own reflections and evaluations of that experience.

This constant and subtle shifting in perspective between the raw reflections of the boy, as recollected by the narrator, and the detached hindsight of the latter have substantiated the confessional character of the novel. And yet again, because of the ambiguity of the book's status – is it straightforward fiction or is it a poetic recreation of direct experience? – the revelation of self is never so obtrusive as to offend notions of 'decorous reticence'. Darman Moenir's accomplishment is to have followed the perceptions of his hero in the course of a coherently cumulative account, and in so doing to have shown how the self in Indonesia is constructed by idioms different from those to which we have been accustomed by other autobiographical traditions.

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