Contesting the Imagined preman

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Some six months into the Covid pandemic, I too took up a digital subscription with Kompas, a national Indonesian newspaper. I realized that there was little chance for fieldwork in the near future, and thus that I should be more disciplined in my reading of Indonesian-language media. The newspaper’s imagery and reportage contrasted greatly with my immediate surroundings, a practically Covid-free Melbourne. Instead, Kompas documented hospitals at capacity, the deaths of health workers, the rapidly filling graveyards in Jakarta, and the sudden need to build more on the city’s fringes. Such a stress on everyday urban needs spoke volumes against the relative vagueness of the nation’s statistics on Covid cases and deaths. But, of course, there were many similarities to my situation in Melbourne: the need to ‘flatten the curve’, the constant press-conferences from local politicians stating that everything was under control, the implementation of lockdowns, and the exhortations for everyone to wash their hands and to practice social distancing.

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Something else, however, soon caught my eye. The Indonesian Chief of Police, the Kepala Polri, had devised the tactic of ‘embracing’ preman in the service of implementing lockdowns and holding people in the service of preman of ‘embracing’ film, mass media. It is for this reason that cultural products and discourses: literature, also relates to their contested position in the study of doing ‘on-the-ground’ fieldwork, and also to structure a kind of cultural genealogy of the (imagined) preman. I relate the effort of ‘making do’ through a variety of means of gathering data to the practice of ‘patchwork methodology’. Below, I highlight some selected imaginings of preman and premanisme. I use a few case studies to explore how the idea of preman is a ‘floating signifier’ with meanings which change over time and space, in accordance with changing social and political conditions.

Ryter (1998, p.145-55) traces the trajectory of the term to the Dutch vrijman – referring to a freed slave. The term’s early meanings also take in a sense of ‘being off duty’, or, ‘civvies’ (berbaju preman). A policeman could become a preman through the change of clothing, adopting a new identity and role. The contested nature of the term preman is also evident through the presence of terms with similar meanings such as gall and jago. Gall, gall, (in its plural form) means ‘roving gangs’, while jago refers to a kind of rural bandit, sometimes in the guise of a Robin Hood-esque figure. In the late 1990s, the term preman took on the connotation of gall-gall, which was more common during the 1980s – particularly at the height of the Petrus – penembak misterius (mysterious killings) – campaign. Ryter points out, however, that preman could more easily stand as ‘a lone figure’ as well as having

Fig. 1 (above): Market alley in Jakarta, Indonesia. Image reproduced courtesy of Anthony Jantzen on Unsplash.

Fig. 2 (left): Poster for the 1954 film Lewat Djam Malam. For the 1954 film Askaria on Unsplash.
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The Study

The disciplined preman

Lewat Djam Malam (After the Curfew), a 1955 film by Usman Ismail set during the Revolutionary Era (1945-1949), depicts the fate of an ex–squatters' fighter Ikander as he attempts to settle back into urban life in Bandung, having left the nearby mountains where he was fighting against the Dutch. Ikander continues to suffer the trauma of the violence and his role in unwittingly killing civilians. Upon returning to civilian life, he attempts to resume his relationship with his fiancée. He is aided in finding a job in the governor’s office, yet finds himself ostracized. He quickly alienates himself through resorting to violence to solve his disputes with fellow government officials. Ikander is in turn feted for his bravery and condemned for his reputation for violence.

Back in Bandung, he takes revenge against his commander, who used the lost of war to fund his post-independence businesses. Ikander is both heroic and flawed. He is unable to settle down to respectability or to continue as a mercenary gun for hire. His violence needs to be motivated by something beyond pure self-interest. His violence needs to be motivated by something beyond pure self-interest.

Literary preman and ethical interventions

Newspapers have long facilitated the emergence and structuring of preman language literature. The rise of a national literature is inseparable from the role of newspapers in Jakarta and other cities throughout Indonesia. Newspapers have provided many of the basic elements of Indonesian literary infrastructure: providing space for short stories, poetry, critical reflection, and advertising. Many preman journalists, Sunday editions of newspapers such as Kompas, Republika, Susara Pemburuans, Java Pos, and Radar Tempo have long feared of short stories of notable and emerging writers. Having and his stories published in various newspapers is a vital step for authors to establish their credentials and reputations in the literary scene. Some have described Indonesian literature as being synonymous with sastra koran (newspaper literature) – a literature, that is, with narratives, settings and contexts that relate immediately to contemporary events. With their urban bases, these stories have a largely urban focus, often relegating rural, peripheral, and non-Jakarta/non-Javanese life to a kind of quaint afterthought. The close connection between newspapers and literary production also saw a number of stories dealing with both the state-orchestrated killings of gati-gali/preman and the rise of preman-like literary figures. Seno Gumira Ajadorna (b.1958), who started work as a journalist in Jakarta during the early 1980s, having come from Yogyakarta, was one of the first authors to rise to prominence on the back of sastra koran and to directly engage with chronicking the various forms of state violence of the Suharto-led New Order regime. Seno's 'The Sound of Rain on Roof Tiles' (dibasmi ‘Bunyi Hujan di Atas Genting’), based on stories written during the 1980s, depicts multilayered urban fears which are directed toward the practice of contemporary urban violence.

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Seno's writing, emblematic of literary fiction, of elite literature to offer a more sympathetic image of urban order and authority. Almost universally regarded as a male figure, Seno's female character is used to explore the complexities of urban ordering, violence, and policing. The character evokes the mythology of the social bandit (as devised by Hobabobkin); a vigilante, operating outside of the law and creating their own sense of justice. Seno's story shows how the state has lost its monopoly on violence. The female preman not only fights against the extortionate acts of male preman, but also against the police who violate the rights and liberties of local women. The preman, in this case, is viewed sympathetic, as a crusader for social justice, who is capable of circumventing police authority.

Seno’s ‘Bunyi Hujan di Atas Genting’ (The Sound of Rain on Roof Tiles). Here, Sawitri, a former-prostitute waits in a constant state of fear, realising that her partner (a local preman) has become a victim of the ‘mysterious killing’. After each rain storm passes, she looks out of her window into a narrow alley to see a corpse splayed out. The corpse is tattooed, and her neighbours crowd around, celebrating the killing. The no man’s land, a preman’s story, ‘Bunyi Hujan di Atas Genting’ uses the body of the dead body as a subject of the violence and intervention. The character evokes the mythology of the social bandit (as devised by Hobabobkin); a vigilante, operating outside of the law and creating their own sense of justice. Seno’s story shows how the state has lost its monopoly on violence. The female preman not only fights against the extortionate acts of male preman, but also against the police who violate the rights and liberties of local women. The preman, in this case, is viewed sympathetic, as a crusader for social justice, who is capable of circumventing police authority.

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Contesting the imagined preman

The preman is a contested figure with origins in earlier iconic figures like the brigand and bandit. The preman, characterised as a vigilant, operating outside of the law (kompromit), is nonetheless frequently co-opted and embraced by the state. Such an embrace is fleeting and tenuous: as is evident through state newspapers to draw on their authority, while, at other times, seeking to have them wiped out (dibubarkan) and to almost seasonally launch programs of eradication (pemberantasan). As such, I argue that the preman is an entangled and ambiguous figure: created through nationalist mythology and a variety of textual discourses, enabled through the conditions of Indonesia’s urbanism. The preman proves to be adaptable: becoming reconfigured at each moment of crisis, whether it be the time of the Revolution, the Massacre of the alleged communists from 1965-66, the reformasi movement and more frequently in the post-authoritarian era, and in the current Covid pandemic. Literary works by Seno Gumira Ajadorna, amongst others, provide a vital resource for understanding how preman are imagined and contested.

Notes


4 The plight of ex-fighters is also explored in the 1952 film Embro (Duay, by D.Diyaput, also produced by Parfini, also Parfini.

5 Azis served as Chief of the Indonesian National Defence in the revolution.


9 Seno tells me the story is based on a real event: “I did see her passing by the godown stall in Melawai.”


11 This work was known as Petrus mysterious killings, from the term pendarab misterius.