

Notes from a Dream

*Nukila Amal's first novel blends visions with reality as she probes Indonesia's puzzling and often perilous diversity, writes **Yenni Kwok**.*



Photo: Hong Kong Baptist University

A period of chaos often gives birth to an artistic renaissance – at least that seems to have been the case in Indonesia. Just as religious and ethnic conflicts plagued the country following the collapse of Suharto's iron-fisted regime in 1998, some fascinating new literary talent has also emerged.

Rising from the ashes of the bloody Muslim-Christian clashes in the Spice Islands is Nukila Amal, who has created a stir with her first novel, *Cala Ibi* (Hummingbird, in the Ternate dialect of the northern Malukus). The tale of two women who inhabit separate worlds yet dream about each other's existence has been hailed by critics as a triumph of Indonesian contemporary literature.

“The novel is about duality,” says Nukila, who recently attended the International Writers Workshop at Hong Kong Baptist University. “It juxtaposes contrasting worlds: dream and reality, centre and periphery, masculine and feminine, logic and intuition. But it isn't only about extreme polarity. I also want to show there is a middle zone, a grey area.”

One of the leading characters is a city dweller called Maya (Sanskrit for illusion), whose seemingly perfect life begins to crumble when she starts dreaming of Maia, her doppelganger, who lives in the northern Malukus. Maya, named after the Greek goddess Maia, who rules the realm of night,

embarks on a journey with a dragon, *Cala Ibi*, who imparts wisdom to her.

The novel alludes to the violence in the Maluku. Like the writer, who hails from the Spice Islands and lives in Jakarta, Maya looks at the bloodshed, which claimed thousands of lives, from afar. “I started writing the draft in 1997,” says Nukila, 36. “I put it aside for about three years. When the conflicts in the Maluku flared I knew I had to write again. It was a way of making sense of what was going on.”

It was in 2000, the year of the dragon, that Nukila started to write again. She included the Chinese dragon, giving it a Malukan name. The mystical beast represents an agent of change who ultimately leads Maya to a radical change in her life. Yet it also has another function. “It reflects the pluralistic nature of Indonesia,” Nukila says. “In the novel, I talk a lot about identities, who Indonesians really are. If Indonesia is pluralistic, then my hometown, Ternate, is very pluralistic. It had a long history of the spice trade and encounters with traders from Arabia and China.”

Nukila is of mixed ancestry – she counts Arab, Chinese and Ternate among her ancestors. And in *Cala Ibi* she draws not only on her Muslim background but on other eastern spiritual traditions – Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism – which lend her the idea of illusion. The artworks of Dutch artist M.C. Escher inspires the non-linear narrative, flowing like a horizontal eight or a Mobius strip.

Indeed, as the women cross between the realms of dream and reality it becomes less clear who is dreaming about whom. Like the famous Taoist anecdote of Zhuangzi's butterfly dream, we begin to wonder: is it Maya who dreams about Maia, or Maia who dreams about Maya?

The arrival of Nukila on the literary scene was a surprise, not only for critics but also the writer herself. She attended tourism college in the western Javanese town of Bandung and later worked at a Hilton hotel in Surabaya, in eastern Java. But in 1996, after 18 months at the hotel, she felt a corporate career was not for her.

“I decided to quit,” she says. “My work was very time-consuming. It didn't leave much time for other things. I felt I would have missed a lot of things in life if I had kept going on like that.”

The idea to write came out of blue. “I just woke up one morning and thought that writing could be fun,” she says.

Nukila says Maya, who initially represents the conventional life to which many Indonesians aspire, isn't modelled on her own life. "Maya is based on a friend of mine," she says. "She worked in the Marriott Hotel and she had a great career. It was as if she had a perfect life."

Urged on by her sister, Nukila sent a short story to *Kalam*, a Jakarta-based literary journal. In 2003, just as the Malukan conflict drew to a close, *Cala Ibi* was published and shortlisted for the prestigious Khatulistiwa literary award. Two years later, in 2005, her short story collection, *Laluba*, was named Indonesia's best literary work of the year by a leading news magazine, Tempo.

Both books have yet to be translated into English. There has been some interest, says the writer, who also translates Indonesian poems into English. "But I don't want to concern much about it," she says, shrugging her shoulders.

Although Indonesia is a vast and diverse country, most of its writers come from the two principal islands of Java and Sumatra. Nukila, who often returns to the Malukus for inspiration, gives a literary voice to an often forgotten region. The short story *Laluba* is set in the village where her father was born.

"Laluba was the name of my father's speedboat. During the conflict, his village was burned to ashes – houses, mosques and boats, including his speedboat," she says. "I went back to the Malukus every year. When the conflict spread to Ternate, I returned to Jakarta on the last plane, just before the government isolated the Malukus to prevent the conflict spreading."

For her, religious conflicts make no sense. Quoting a Buddhist analogy, she says: "Religion is like a finger pointing to the moon, and it should not be confused with the moon itself."

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