PROJECT MUSE®

Interview with Astrid Reza

Astrid Reza

Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia,
Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, October 2021, pp. 351-356 (Article)

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2021.0012>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/838731>

[Access provided at 26 Apr 2023 11:41 GMT with no institutional affiliation]

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Interview with Astrid Reza

Southeast of Now editor Yvonne Low speaks with translator Astrid Reza about their year-long collaboration on the translation of the memoir *Sudjojono dan Aku*, by the late Mia Bustam (b. 1920–2011).

YL: You started translating Mia's memoir, *Sudjojono dan Aku*, as part of a private research project with me some time in 2019. Were you surprised that there might be scholarly interest in her writings outside of Indonesia?

AR: I was not surprised that there is scholarly interest in Mia Bustam; she is a key figure in the narrative, and hard to ignore in the life of Sudjojono. She is a woman who consciously chose such a life whilst also being the woman chosen by Sudjojono as an equal life partner, in navigating their life together both as a marriage couple and as an intellectual/artist couple. Their separation marked a turning point in both of their lives—family life, children, political views, artistic career and their individual paths. There were so many intriguing questions that could be raised about the beginning of her story and how it ended. And in my opinion, this would be the right time to share Mia Bustam's narration. It is a rich resource for woman artist studies, providing so much information and observations about their lives in those periods, that has been purposely forgotten in Indonesian historiography.

YL: When did you first encounter Mia Bustam's writings and what were your thoughts on them?

AR: I encountered Mia Bustam's writing, *Dari Kamp ke Kamp*, which covers her life after her divorce with Sudjojono, her short art career before 1965 and her journey from one prison camp to another in Java. I stumbled upon her work

[**Southeast of Now**
Vol. 5, Nos. 1 & 2 (October 2021), pp. 351–56]

in 2009 in the course of research for my undergraduate paper and I included this book as a reference. At that time I focused more on the details of the prison diaries, which amazed me since she wrote them solely based on her memory. She was nearly 90 at the time of its publication.

When I reread her writing before doing the translation at the end of 2019, I was surprised that the memoir *Sudjojono dan Aku* actually stirred more emotions than I had expected. It deals with everything that an Indonesian woman has struggled with from time to time: as a woman artist, an intellectual, a wife and also a mother. It is like reading the complete cycle of one's life, of its happiness, struggles and hardships, but without losing oneself to bitterness.

YL: Has the thought of translating Mia Bustam's writings—or any other texts—crossed your mind? And has this changed after you commenced on this research project and started to translate *Sudjojono dan Aku* in 2019?

AR: Mia Bustam's books are already considered rare editions nowadays. There have been no more prints since her last book in 2013. Although considered as important material for studying the 1965 archives, the thought of translating them has not come to mind yet, since the current stage of this kind of archive is focused on compiling, saving and hopefully publishing later. Most of this research is done independently without funding. Not forgetting too that such publications are often still sensitive for the public and the constantly changing government attitude towards the 1965 reconciliation effort.

The first time I got this offer to translate Mia Bustam's work, after rereading her book, I suddenly felt the urge to translate the whole book. It provoked so many reflections on the Indonesian art world and the lives of Indonesian women. And somehow in diving deeper into the material, suddenly the urgency to make it available in English became important.

YL: I sense here that the urgency has in part to do with the marginalisation of women's voices, but also one that was particular to the history of Indonesia. What specifically about the memoir did you feel set it apart from other literary works by other Indonesian women writers produced then?

AR: Mia experienced many stages in her long and dynamic life. She witnessed Indonesia's history not only as a bystander but also in her own active involvement. She recorded everything in detail at every turn of her life. Through her personal notes, we see Sudjojono's figure from a different perspective and how her role, also her own opinion, grew throughout the years. We see clearly the stages of her full transformation into her own person from reading her memoir.

If we call Sudjojono the father of Indonesia's modern art, then how might we fairly consider the role of Mia Bustam in the history of Indonesian art?

The marginalisation of women's voices in Indonesian history took an extreme turn in 1965 when women were not allowed to participate in politics and the public arena anymore. Women organisations were banned and women were sent back behind closed doors. The critical voice of women that marked Mia's generation was completely silenced and the narration of the many women before her was erased. A lot of the many progressive works, ideas and figures of these women were deliberately eliminated from the narration of the State's version of history. The image of critical women labelled as Gerwani—Gerakan Wanita Indonesia (Indonesian Women's Movement)—which was the biggest women organization of the time post 1965 are so embedded in the collective memory of Indonesia as the result of 32 years of propaganda during the New Order regime.

Mia's recollection as an artist of her own, her relationship to Sudjojono, her family dynamics and her life journey recorded many unknown details of people's lives during that time. This gives us an insight into what life actually was like before 1965 and who were those people labelled as "communist" or as an enemy of the state by the regime. What makes her memoir stand out is her honesty with what she experienced and this has mesmerized readers who experienced it alongside her. She had a remarkable life, being a single mother of eight children, an artist, a writer, and a cultural and political activist. And even though she was a political prisoner for 13 years, she did not lose her spirit; she kept going in her nineties, doing art in the many ways possible and writing about everything. She is an inspiring woman figure who courageously experienced life in full circle over and over, until she became unbreakable. She had put her voice out there and now this voice needs to be heard further and wider than before.

YL: Could you share some of the challenges—both anticipated and unanticipated—in the course of translating the chapters? To this end, were there any aspects of the translation (of Chapter 6 published here) that you might feel unsatisfied with?

AR: The challenges of translating the material of Mia Bustam lies actually in being involved emotionally while translating her writing, especially those episodes of her life with dramatic turns that make readers feel personally involved. I often feel that her voice represents the many voices of Indonesian women and that it even goes beyond a historical timeline. Translating Mia Bustam is not only capturing her words or language, but the spirit of her voice to be conveyed to

the reader. The other challenge is in deciding the grammar to use, because she is often recalling the past and reflecting about it in the present. The text often dips in and out of memories of her life.

I also had to ask older people from her generation, as she often uses Javanese words to describe things or in expressions, which needs to be translated in the correct context in English. She also uses other foreign languages such as Dutch. Mia's language even in Bahasa Indonesia is both direct and lyrical.

YL: Reading Chapter 6 has been an emotionally gripping experience because it spoke so frankly about the imperfections of humans (not only of Sudjojono but also of herself). What part of that chapter did you find most memorable in your translation process?

AR: I feel the part that was most dramatic was when Mia lost control of herself and hugged Sudjojono in the middle of the night. Then she became so ashamed of herself and tried to kill herself in front of Sudjojono. Yet the later part when they decided to get divorced would be the turning point of her decisiveness in taking control of her own life. It's a chapter where you see her at her lowest but also how she reclaimed her own power. All these emotional events of hers can be so direct and honestly conveyed for us readers, to be with her at those crucial moments. You can't help but reach out and hold her hands along the way, not out of pity but with strength and resilience.

YL: Could you reflect on the process of translation where the aim is often to deviate as little as possible from the original form and intent; how did you manage the deeply personal content of a memoir to capture nuance as well as the author's subjective voice?

AR: My own experience while translating Mia Bustam is how related our experiences are to each other. As an Indonesian woman living in a dominantly Javanese culture, both critical and intellectual, and also as wife to an artist from a different generation. We both experienced divorce and living as a single mother. But the scale of Mia's life experience has inspired me further and built more courage for us as the younger generation of women. I feel the moment of her finding herself is important and that in further challenges in her life, she still chooses to bravely keep going on and write about her life. She created art in whatever ways she could in such oppressive situations.

By diving into and reading her experiences, to take her voice as the voice of the woman before me, I could choose and process carefully the feelings that she had expressed through her writings. I tried to read a lot of other materials about her that I could find, but it wasn't until I connected with her daughter, Ibu Nasti, that I could start discussing further about her figure and

character as a person. I think it's very important to understand her completely while translating her voice into another language. This process became a personal connection and really sparked my interest to dive further into her other archives that are yet to be published.

YL: As a feminist scholar and translator, do you think women's writings in Indonesian art and culture have been given sufficient attention locally, regionally and internationally?

AR: Currently women's writings in art and culture have not received as much attention as they should; there are still many Indonesian women figures whose works have not been given the recognition they deserve, and Mia Bustam is one of them. The publication of such work is at a small scale locally, being circulated and discussed only in small circles. It rarely elicits regional or international attention, especially if they are not published in English. Often such findings are not known if they are not being discussed publicly. Publishers also have the tendency to prioritize more popular themes instead of critical ones.

The suppression of critical women and their voices after 1965 has caused much damage in the process of knowing or documenting that of existing women's works or the figures of those times. The published work of women before 1998 need always to be aligned with the military government policy. Such work and voices are often labelled as dangerous materials. In the last two decades, Indonesian women's publications have experienced freedom, but they have often lost their roots from their predecessors. Many important women, aside from Kartini,¹ have become relatively unknown to the younger generation of women and this is very concerning. Not knowing where we come from, or that Indonesian women have had a long story of struggle and were actually some of the pioneers in the region, makes many of the new wave of women movements seem ahistorical. Therefore, the publication of works such as Mia Bustam's are significant in filling these gaps that we currently have.

BIOGRAPHY

Astrid Reza graduated from the History Department of Gadjahmada University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in 2010. She writes broadly on literature, art and history across various media. She has translated many books with themes related to social politics, history, feminism and literature. She is currently contributing to RUAS (Ruang Arsip dan Sejarah Perempuan – Space for Women Archive and History), Yogyakarta, and developing collaborative research with PERETAS (*Perempuan Lintas Batas*) network, an intersectional organization for women across borders working in the fields of art and culture.

NOTE

- ¹ Raden Adjeng Kartini (1879–1904) is a Javanese noblewoman remembered for her contribution to female education and for speaking up for women's rights. The New Order regime after 1965 re-imagined her image from a radical women's emancipator to a dutiful wife and obedient daughter. Instead of discussing her many critical writings, Kartini Day is celebrated as a day for women to wear their kebaya and to dress like an aristocratic Javanese princess (which contravenes Kartini's ideas).