

# Poetic Reaction to Political Excess: W.S. Rendra, Peacock and People's Poet

Moira Neagle

**Biodata:** Moira Neagle is a Bachelor candidate at Faculty of Arts, Charles Darwin University, Northern Territory, Australia. Her research interests are in Bahasa Indonesian and the nature of this language. Her contact email: [moira.neagle@bigpond.com](mailto:moira.neagle@bigpond.com)

## Abstract

W.S. Rendra (1936 – 2009) was an Indonesian dramatist and poet. During the years of the Suharto's reign, W.S. Rendra was Indonesia's major contemporary poet. He initially was a leader of avant-garde theatre through his writing and performing. However, he became a poet who dared to speak out against the ruling regime of Indonesia. He was imprisoned for nine months in 1979 and his poetry readings and theatrical performances were often banned. His poetry criticised the political landscape of his nation through a diverse range of poetic techniques and vibrant missives. This paper focuses on six long poems which are passionate observations of the political and day to day realities of Indonesia during the years when Suharto was the supreme President. His poetry attracted the populous as well as identifying him as a political activist.

**Keywords:** W.S. Rendra, Indonesia, Suharto, Poetry, Religion, Symbolism, BurungMerak, Political Activism, Class, Poverty, Colloquial, Corruption

## Introduction:

The maxim, the pen is mightier than the sword, could be aptly applied to the works of W.S. Rendra. In the political context of 1960s and 1970s Indonesia, the focus era of this paper, oppression and corruption reigned. Rendra used his words to inform people and as a clarion call to oppose the New Order during this period. His poetry and his dramatic readings of it challenged the New Order and in so doing, he attracted large audiences and the ire of those in power.

This paper describes the man and the political landscape of his country, Indonesia, through the turbulent years of the 1960's and 1970's. It contains examination of a number of his poems with a view to identifying his literary style, diverse poetic techniques and vivid messages. The poems examined are Nyanyian Duniawi (A Wordly Song from Blues Untuk Bonnie 1974), Pemandangan Senjakala (Twilight View 1968), Nyanyian Angsa (Swan Song 1971), Bersatulah Pelacur-Pelacur Kota Jakarta (Prostitutes of Jakarta – Unite 1968), Khotbah (Sermon 1968) and Pesan Pencopet Kepada Pacarnya (A Pick-pocket's Advice To His Mistress 1967). These poems were chosen for their vehement commentaries of the political context of his homeland. His poetry made him a political activist when it was dangerous to be such; however, his ideas had significant resonance and impact.

Rendra carefully crafted ideas and delivered them with engaging theatrics to large live audiences. He used the cadence of his language and his passion to charismatically perform. He became renowned for his colour and boisterous delivery. Thus, this sage of his time took on the colour and showmanship of a *burungmerak* (peacock).

## **A profile of W.S. Rendra**

Willibrordus Surendra Broto Rendra was born in 1937 into a Catholic family. As an adult, he converted to Islam and simplified his name to Rendra. He studied English literature and culture at Gajah Mada University in Yogyakarta. However, he did not complete these studies as he became preoccupied with staging plays. His first play was “Dead Voices,” staged in 1963 (Prijosusilo 2009).

He became enthralled with the craft of performance. As his popularity spread as a dramatist and poet, Rendra drew on his traditional religious ritual performances as well as emerging avant-garde styles to enhance his presentations. Rendra has been credited with introducing modern theatre techniques, particularly through his work with the Bengkel Teater which he founded in 1968 (Prijosusilo). It was through his artistic presentations and his own colourful manner that he became known as the “Burung Merak” (the Peacock) by the press. His popularity grew as a poet through the 1950s. He took delight in promoting himself as cosmopolitan, flamboyant maverick.

Throughout his life, he was highly influential as a poet across Indonesia and remained so until his death in 2009, aged 74 years. It is an accepted principle that a Javanese poet must be a guardian of the spirit of the nation (Bramantyo Prijosusilo 2009). This was a role he took seriously and with deliberate intent.

### **The times in which Rendra lived**

Rendra lived through a tempestuous time in Indonesian history. Indonesia declared independence at the end of World War II. Initially, independent Indonesia was a parliamentary democracy. Nevertheless, there were many opposing forces contesting the politics of Indonesia.

In 1959, President Sukarno introduced ‘Guided Democracy.’ This period saw a reduction of parliamentary power and an increase in Sukarno’s personal power. The military was developing its own power base and wealth. These factors were problematic in terms of the health of the Indonesian democracy. An alleged Coup was attempted on 30 September 1965. This led to the subsequent and systematic elimination of Communists and left wing sympathisers all the way down to village level. Eventually, Suharto took power and established the New Order regime.

During the years of Guided Democracy (a poetically euphemistic term in itself), many freedoms were denied, even violently suppressed. However, amid such authoritarianism, new forms of prose, drama and poetry arose.

These were chaotic times and the artists speaking out, articulating the rage and frustration of the people attracted large audiences. Rendra was a significant voice amongst these artists. During a poetry reading in 1978, Suharto’s military agents threw ammonia bombs on to the stage where he was presenting and arrested him. He was imprisoned for nine months without any charge and was not permitted to give public performances for

another seven years. However, this experience prompted him to write more poetry. One poem, *'Paman Dobleng' (Uncle Dobleng)*, inspired by his experience in jail, was set to music by the Indonesian rock band KantataTakwa (Prijosusilo, 2009).<sup>1</sup>

Rendra's courage to express opposition to the politics of his era was extensively admired and he survived when the other political activists did not.

### **Rendra's poetry voices political truths**

In the mid-1960s, after four years study of acting in New York, Rendra returned with a new and far more direct style of writing. It was blunt, even considered blasphemous, as can be seen in his poem *Nyanyian Angsaor Swan Song*. His sharp and candid words were flung against the politics of his homeland and struck like a slap.

By the 1970s, Rendra was prolific and explosive in his output of poetry and theatre. This creativity was integral to his political activism against the dictatorship and was voiced loudly until 1978, when he was imprisoned (Lane 2010).

Rendra's poem, *Nyanyian Duniawi (A Wordly Song from Blues Untuk Bonnie 1974)* speaks of economic class differences, hunger, misery, passion and insurrection against the established norms (Rendra in Aveling p.42, 1974). He uses the metaphor of a *'gadisitukucumbu di kebun manga' (I make love to a maiden in the mango garden)* to depict the sweet attraction of a better option. This maiden represents the desire of the people to oppose their degraded lives,

'Her heart is wild and fiery' (Aveling. 1974. p.43)

and passion to tackle that which is oppressing her people.

'trampling hunger and thirst underfoot,' (Ibid.)

This was deeply attractive to a populous hurting severely amid political catastrophe.

'In our misery we reach out

In the dark and the shadows

(the passion of our rebellion roars).' (ibid.)

The poet rejoices in her existence and commitment,

'And her fierce laughter

Makes my heart glad.' (ibid.)

What she suggests is the cover offered by darkness out of fear of repercussions, regardless of how alluring it appears.

'In the shadows of the trees

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading on the Guided Democracy era see Max Lane. . 'Mass Mobilisation In Indonesian Politics, 1960 to 2001: towards a class analysis' A doctoral thesis, University of Wollongong, 2009

her body shines  
like a golden deer.' (Ibid.)

What she offers is not complete, not totally defined but, nevertheless, deeply attractive.

'Her unfinished breasts  
are like half ripe fruit,' (Ibid.)

Rendra sees himself as a part of this 'maiden's' movement. He is at one with it

'I embrace her  
as I embrace life and death' (Ibid.)

She is his motivator, his personal coach whose words will maintain his focus of intent.

'And her fast breathing  
whispers in my ears.' (Ibid.)

The impact of what she can achieve is amazing and has its own inherent beauty:

'How amazed she is  
at the rainbow  
beneath her hooded lids.' (Ibid.)

The poet then suggests that even their forefathers are observing how this will play out,

'Our ancient ancestors  
appear from the centre of the dark  
coming nearer  
in their ragged clothing  
and squat  
watching us.' (Ibid.)

They, too, it would appear, have a vested interest in this insurrection.

In the poem, '*Pemandangan Senjakala*,' (*Twilight View 1968*), Rendra is far more direct in his use of language to rage against the actions which had killed Indonesians in the so-called communist coup of 1965.

'Smell of munitions in the air. Smell of corpses. And horseshit.' (Aveling, p.45)

The repetition of words is evident in this poem to accentuate the shameful reprisals upon the weak. He paints a dastardly scene of the devastation which is being wrought against the people.

'A pack of wild dogs

eat hundreds and hundreds of human bodies  
the dead and the half dead.

And among the scorched trees of the forest  
puddles of blood form into a pool.' (Ibid.)

The forces of evil are 'Kelelawar-lelelawarraksasa,' vampire bats, that rape and kill, wild dogs are eating corpses and the evidence is the stark red of blood.

The dead are viewed as if they are martyrs who are cleansed,

'Twenty angels come down from heaven  
to purify those in their death throes' (Ibid.)

Nevertheless, the horror persists against the innocent,

'ambushed by the giant vampires and raped' (Ibid.)

Even when there is a 'vital breeze which travels gently on' (Ibid.), it is just a lull in the devastation. Such a bloody breeze will only serve to inflame the passion of the opposing forces, the 'angels and bats.' In the last two lines of this poem, Rendra seemingly turns to speak directly to the two sides of the Indonesian political discontent and charges them both with these crimes and the inherent havoc,

'for you have worked so intently to create it.' (Ibid.)

After writing in a ballad-like form in his early years, Rendra's poetry developed into a predominantly narrative style. He frequently adopts the colloquial to describe and condense the people to their exact lives and lifestyles. The poem, *Nyanyian Angsa* (Swan Song) is an example of his use of the retelling of a story intermingled with symbolism. This long poem, on one level, tells the story of an aging and no longer so pretty whore who is thrown out of a brothel. She is seriously ill; she has no money and owes money to many, including her doctor. He is no longer prepared to give her any more than token medication, a vitamin C injection, because she cannot pay.

Within this narrative, the subject of the poem speaks in the first person,

'I tremble with fear' (Aveling, p.48)

The whore calls herself by name, 'Maria Zaitun is my name' (Ibid. p.47) and this is repeated at pertinent points through the poem. Her name sounds distinctly Christian and appears to make reference to the Christian religious significance of (Ave) Maria, as in the Mother of Christ.

Again, in this poem, Rendra uses repetition of words and in short sentences:

'Takadaangin.Taka da mega.

(No wind. No clouds' (Ibid. p.47)

'No suitcase

No possessions' (Ibid.)

'Her eyes red

Her lips dry

Her gums bleeding' (Ibid.)

These short simple statements, each beginning with the same word, emphasize the scene he is creating.

Maria is the whole of the opposing parts of the Indonesian people. She is ailing as they are. She is penniless, as they are. She is corrupted by disease which perpetrates the offensive symptoms of ulcers, bleeding gums and her stench. But Maria Zaitun is oblivious to their judgements,

'I can feel nothing. Think nothing

Maria Zaitun is my name

An unfortunate and frightened whore' (Ibid. p.51)

Receiving little assistance from the doctor, Maria walks shoeless on the hot asphalt of the road to the church. But its doors are locked. Maria is denied help again and again from the institutions which are meant to assist, to be empathetic, to be supportive. She waits outside the presbytery for the pastor who is still eating his lunch.

'She waits dazed by the sun' (Ibid.)

It is as though even nature confounds her.

The pastor eventually comes outside to her,

'having picked the remains of the meal from his teeth

he lights a cigar' (Ibid.)

The distinction between these two characters is starkly drawn. The pastor reeks of wealth and privilege.

'smell of wine from his mouth

Slippers of crocodile skin' (Ibid.)

Direct speech is used by the characters Maria encounters throughout the poem. Maria states to the priest,

"I want to confess my sins" (Ibid.)

Her sin is shocking to the priest. It goes to the core of evil by his Christian standards.

"Yes, I have VD"

Hearing this the pastor takes two steps back

His face contracts' (Ibid. p.53)

Such a sickness speaks of sin. The pastor is aghast at the depths of her immorality and the poet stresses this through the simple and highly effective underscoring of the passing of time as he processes this horrifying information:

'Three soundless seconds  
Matahariterusmenyala  
(The sun continues to burn)' (Ibid.)

He cannot conceive that she chose to sin thus,

"You were led into sin" (Ibid.) and  
"You were deceived by the devil" (Ibid.)

But, no, it was neither of these causes. Instead, it was the scourge of poverty. Maria knows that her life 'has been a failure' and through this simple truth, Rendra is drilling to the heart of what ails his people - poverty. Maria is the poor of Rendra's country who have been offered salvation from a Christian Church which will not help those who are reduced to immoral acts in order to feed themselves. She represents all for whom political opposition rebels against the status quo. It is her swan song after all, her last song.

Maria knows that her life is diminishing and she seeks the comfort of the dying that there will be compassion and forgiveness. However, there is none from this harsh pastor:

"you are some sort of wild tigress  
Maybe you are mad" (Ibid.)

The pastor states that she is in need of psychiatric help, not religious help.

The loving god is not offering her help but accusation:

'The angel who guards heaven  
whose face is arrogant and malicious  
and whose sword burns  
points accusingly at me' (Ibid. p.55)

There is nought she can do to save herself or to gain any degree of comfort.

'I am tired, powerless  
Cannot cry. Cannot speak' (Ibid.)

And, again she reiterates:

'Maria Zaitun is my name  
A hungry and thirsty prostitute' (Ibid.)

The reader cannot imagine that her plight could worsen but

'Suddenly while crossing the street

she slips on dogshit' (Ibid.)

She longs for this life of suffering to end but the 'angel who guards paradise' is sadistic and revengeful and perpetrates rape.

'Loathingly  
he thrusts his virile sword  
into my crotch' (Ibid. p.57)

The suffering is not to end but to be endured, as it is for the Indonesian people. Even at twilight,

'The angel who guards paradise  
resolutely drives her away' (Ibid.p.59)

Night offers her some relief initially.

'Maria Zaitun is no longer afraid' (Ibid.)

This time of the day affords her some rest from the heat of the 'stinker' sun and allows her to remember better times bathing in the river with her mother.

'She is no longer lonely  
And her fear has gone  
She feels as if she is with an old friend' (Ibid.)

But, too soon, the pain that has dominated her life is reasserted. She confesses to the night with a heavy heart, and again Rendra uses the metaphor of '*Malaikat penjaga firdaus,*'

'The angel who guards paradise  
whose face is cold and malicious  
Refuses to hear' (Ibid.p.61)

There is no salvation to be found from him.

At this point in the poem, the poet states the scene in straightforward nouns to sum up the dilemma Maria faces:

'Time  
Moon  
Trees  
River  
Syphilis  
Ulcers  
Woman

Like glass

River reflecting the bright light' (Ibid.)

At her lowest point, a man reaches out to her from the other side of the river. He is handsome and his loving touch gives her peace and calm that she has never dared to hope. Maria kisses his body and discovers

'In his left side

In both hands

In both feet' (Ibid.63)

From these scars, she recognizes who he is and

'He nods his head. "Indeed. Yes"' (Ibid.p.65)

He is Jesus Christ and with him, Maria is no longer afraid

'Loneliness and misery are destroyed' (Ibid.)

Her nemesis, 'the angel who guards paradise' is thwarted and

'Dancing I enter the gates of paradise

and eat as many apples as I want' (Ibid.)

Through this ending, Rendra offers hope to the impoverished, the sick, the homeless; he allows the dream of salvation to persist as Maria Zaitun enters the Garden of Eden where she can eat as many apples as she so desires.

'Maria Zaitun is my name

whore and bride both' (Ibid.)

The two factions can exist side by side.

Rendra uses the metaphor of 'pelacur,' a slut or prostitute, again in the poem, '*Bersatulahpelacur-pelacurkota Jakarta*' or "*Prostitutes of Jakarta – Unite!*" written in 1968 to refer to the people of Indonesia. The writer is the speaker in this poem, as in many of Rendra's poems.

By the 1970s, Rendra was the vanguard of left-wing political analysis and he highlighted the class polarisation and associated exploitation of the proletariat in this poem (Lane 2009). He supports the Jakarta prostitutes and urges them to rise up against the leaders of the revolution who act as they want and in so doing, makes them suffer. The speaker reminds the prostitutes of the misery they experience which is due to their inappropriate actions. These leaders use the prostitutes and they are also the ones who would seek to crush them because they foolishly believe they are the source of Indonesia's cancerous society. The speaker invokes

'You are a part of the proletariat

they have created' (Ibid.p.31)

The title of this poem is a play on the Marxist slogan of, 'Workers of the world unite.' The people have been used and abused, as prostitutes are and then are left scared, shamed and weakened. The lack of employment is the main reason these women have become prostitutes. He states that the reason why the prostitutes of Jakarta service the politicians and senior-civil-servants is due to the very real threat of hunger, the yoke of poverty, the long futile search for work. He adds, too, that there is no point in getting an education, as this will not raise you out of poverty. Thus, Rendra invokes dialectical materialism as Marx defined because of the class divisions in Indonesian society and what this means for the poor.

Initially, Rendra opposed Communist sympathisers. However, as the tyranny of the Suharto years compounded, his poetry and plays became more and more left wing in tone and the ideas expressed.

Prostitutes are those on the lowest rung of the class structure and it is they who must carry the revolution to its rightful outcome for they are the ones blamed by the leaders for the desperate state of the Indonesian nation. However, it is difficult to denigrate such people beyond their current despair,

'It is harder to put you down  
than a political party' (Ibid. p.31)

The poet allows for regret but despair is not to be permitted.

'Regret as you may  
But don't despair  
Or allow yourselves to be sacrificed.' (Ibid. p.27)

This incantation is repeated again later in the poem.

He urges them to brush or, in this case, 'comb' off their sorrows and to rise up to shield themselves and to oppose and, on no condition,

'allow yourselves to be sacrificed.' (Ibid.)

Rendra is disgusted with a government which speaks of 'national struggle' and then assaults its citizens. The *pelacur-pelacur* are denounced but simultaneously referred to as

'the inspiration of the revolution' (Ibid.)

Rendra speaks to individual *pelacur-pelacur* – *Sarinah and Dasima*. The name, Sarinah means spiritually intense with the ability to sting or charm, and Dasima means companion or mistress. The revolutionary leaders bolstered the peoples' hopes with words beckoning prosperity but they did this whilst abusing them. Rendra uses explicitly sexual language to stress this exploitation.

'Their bolts too rapidly shot.' (Ibid. p. 29)

The rampant corruption of the country is simply another chain around the necks of the people:

‘could only open the door of opportunity  
if you would open your legs.’ (Ibid.)

In ‘*Bersatulah Pelacur-pelacur kota Jakarta,*’ Rendragoes on to declare ‘*Merekaharus....*’ repeatedly to emphasize what must occur, what concessions must be provided, what blame must be accepted;

‘They must give you work  
They must return your standing  
They too must bear the weight of their mistakes.’ Ibid.)

He urges the prostitutes to take up the only arms they possess to oppose their tormentors;

‘Take up sticks  
Wave your bras on the ends of them  
...waving them like flags they have disgraced.’ (Ibid.)

They have the ultimate power because of the service they provide:

‘Strike for a month  
soon they will be committing adultery  
with their brothers’ wives.’ (Ibid. p.33)

Such chaos will bring the nation to its knees as the powerful men will not allow the desecration of the women they own.

His Catholic upbringing is evident in a number of his poems, including *Khotbahor Sermon, 1968*. This, too, is an extended narrative style poem. Despite the heat of the day, a young priest is described in beatific terms but his words perplex the parishioners

“Now let us disperse.  
There is no sermon today.” (Ibid.p.3)

The parishioners remained in their seats,

‘Their mouths hung open  
they stopped praying  
but they all wanted to hear.’ (Ibid.)

It is as though the populous wanted to be reassured by the old institutions in which they had had staunch faith but, suddenly, nothing was forthcoming. The silence does not last:

‘Then all at once they complained  
and together with the strange voice from their mouths

came a foul stench  
which had to be quickly stifled.' (Ibid.)

Rendra is again using a religious metaphor to speak of the division within his country. Most lines are short sentences and he frequently begins a set of sentences with the same pronoun:

'their faces looked sad.  
Their eyes questioned.  
Their mouths gaped' (Ibid.p.5)

Direct speech is used by the priest and the parishioners are silent. Only their demeanour expresses the will of the people.

The priest is the people's leader. The parishioners want so much more from their leader but he seemingly has nothing constructive to offer. He is young with still so much to offer and he needs time to

'meditate on the glory of God.' (Ibid.p.3)

The reader can sense the increasing fear and desperation of the priest:

'Father.Father. Why hast Thou forsaken me?' (Ibid.p.5)

This line is an echo of a line from the Bible when Jesus is on the cross at Golgotha, he calls out to his Lord:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (The Bible, Matthew 27:46)

At this point in Rendra's poem, he casts a denigrating image of the Indonesian people sitting fixed and non-reactive:

'Like a flock of hungry lazy jackals  
they hang their mouths.' (Ibid.p,5)

The parishioners remain seated waiting for their leader to deliver the message they are desperate to hear.

'...because it was so hot  
And of the misery they bore.  
The stench was extraordinarily foul  
And their questions too stank foully.' (Ibid.)

All the priest can offer is platitudes:

'Life is very difficult  
Dark and difficult  
There are many torments' (Ibid.)

The people and the poet stop listening as the priest drones on

‘.....ra-ra-ra-  
Ra-ra-ra, hum-pa-pa, ra-ra-ra.’ (Ibid.)

The priest’s words descend into nonsense and still he buzzes on.

Eventually, the parishioners find their collective voice and echo his platitudes with the same banality:

‘All spoke together:  
Ra-ra-ra.Hum-pa-pa.’ (Ibid.p.7)

This prompts a redirection in the priest’s non-sermon:

”To the men who like guns  
Who fix the flags of truth to their bayonets-points” (Ibid.)

And again his speech returns to nonsense. However, amid the ‘li-li-li’s there are lines of ironic clarity:

‘Lift your noses high  
so you don’t see those you walk on.’ (Ibid)

And

‘Cleanse the blood from your hands  
so as not to frighten me  
then we can sit and drink tea  
and talk of the sufferings of society  
and the nature of life and death.’ (Ibid.)

The parishioners then respond:

‘Joyfully the people answered with:  
La-la-la,li-li-li, la-li-lo-lu  
They stood. They stamped their feet on the floor  
Stamping in one rhythm and together  
Uniting their voices in  
La-la-la, li-li-li, la-li-lo-lu.’ (Ibid.)

Unwittingly, the priest has united his parishioners and their voices in unison to mock him. This unity gives them strength and they begin to shout together:

‘precisely and rhythmically’ (Ibid.p.9)

At this stage of the poem, the priest and parishioners are gaining energy from each other until the whole becomes a noisy and calamitous scene. The rhythms of the priest's words are taken up by the parishioners with an energy which is borne of extended deprivation; the one is echoed by the other.

'The people explode with the passion of their lives.'

They stood on the pews.

Banged with their feet.

Bells, gongs, door-pailings, window-panes

If it made noise they pounded on it.

With the one rhythm

In accompaniment to their joyous shouts of:

Bong- bong-bong. Bang-bing-bong. (Ibid.)

This is all escalating to a cacophony. The words on the page are not making sense, the protagonists in the poem are not making any sense; emotions are raging.

'Let us pulverize ourselves.' (Ibid.)

The scene becomes like a tribal dance:

'They rubbed their bodies against each other

Men against women. Men against men.

Women with women. Everyone rubbed.' (Ibid.p.11)

Simultaneously, Rendra is using a metaphor full of irony, for the dance is also the friction between people that this throbbing dance, the political opposition prevalent in his country at that time, in which the people are engaged. The expression, 'Everyone rubbed.' is a double entendre, referring to the rubbing of the dance and the rubbing of opposing views against each other. This metaphor is extended to include the people 'rubbing' against the core institutions of their country, including the religious institutions.

'And some rubbed their bodies against the walls of the church.' (Ibid.)

Rendra extends the religious metaphor by, again, using part quotes from the Bible by paraphrasing The Ten Commandments:

'thou must not steal.

Junior civil servants stop stealing carbon.

Serving-girls stop stealing fried chicken bones.' (Ibid.)

Simultaneously, Rendra is mocking the biblical intent of statements carved in stone by referring to such pedestrian examples.

His poetic wielding flame is then turned upon the Communists:

‘everything belongs to everyone.

Everything is for everyone.

We must be one. Us for us.

Cha-cha-cha, cha-cha-cha.’ (Ibid.)

At this point, the scene descends into chaos. The people ‘roared like animals’ (Ibid. p.13) and acted as a mob. They began to steal whatever they could take from the church: candelabra, curtains, carpets and ‘statues covered with jewels’ (Ibid.). This scene is reminiscent of Matthew 21:12 in which Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling. He said to them, ‘It is written, ‘My House shall be a house of prayer’; but you are making it a robbers’ den.’

The shrill voice of an old woman yells above the mayhem,

“‘I am hungry. Hungry.Hu-u-unggrrrryyy.” (Ibid.)

This is enough to remind the impassioned crowd of their own hunger and ‘Their eyes burned.’ (Ibid.)

The priest has lost control of the horde. He directs them to stop and to go home but they do not.

‘They press forward.

The church was smashed. And their eyes flashed.’ (Ibid.)

The priest patronizingly tries to remind them

“‘Hunger must be overcome by wisdom.” (Ibid. p.15)

The horde becomes a pack and they attack the priest, humiliating him, raping him ‘in a noisy throng’ and then they chop him to pieces. This is a scene full of terror, barbarism and hatred. People are no longer individuals, they are a murderous pack.

‘They feasted in the strength of their unity.’

They drank his blood.

They sucked the marrow from his bones.

Until they had eaten everything

And there was nothing left.’ (Ibid.)

After all of this mayhem, nothing is left. With the build-up of this scene, it is as if there were drums in the background growing louder and louder until this final act of cannibalism and the crescendo of the scene is reached.

The denouement is immediate and Rendra changes the mood completely with his parting, and imbued with deep irony, last word,

‘Fantastic.’ (Ibid.)

Thus the poem ends.

Rendra chooses characters to represent the divisive political factions operating in Indonesia at that time. In ‘*Pesan Pencopet Kepada Pacarnya*’ (*A Pick-pocket’s Advice To His Mistress 1967*), the mistress tantalises with her ‘*elegant body*’

An animal metaphor features in this poem too, and this time it is bats.

‘The bats fly chasing each other  
a sign afternoon is drawing on’ (Ibid. p.35)

These two lines are repeated a number of times through the poem, inferring that different forms of evil chasing each other repeatedly.

The line,

‘Marrying me would only spoil your chances’ (Ibid.)

is made as though commitment would be a step too far, for his livelihood is unpredictable,

‘as a pickpocket my fate is chancy’ (Ibid.)

Both characters, a pickpocket and a mistress, live on the edge. Their lives are fraught with the vicissitudes of fate, they have so little control over their lives. His imagery becomes disturbingly visual, as in the line,

‘The sun vomits painfully into the sea’ (Ibid.)

Realities of life cannot be ignored and ‘love is only of secondary importance (Ibid.p.37). The nation must think of its future, its children. All must be done to ensure their lives are better than those of the current generation opposing tyranny. Rendra faces the reality of the depth of corruption in his country.

‘Start cheating your man right away  
Siphon off what he owns  
To make your own life easier’ (Ibid. p. 37)

And, again in the lines,

‘He enjoys being bribed and corrupting others  
Cheat him in exchange  
That’s how it’s done  
Thieves cheat thieves, that’s usual’ (Ibid.)

Trust and honour are easily smeared away:

‘Among thieves honour is like lipstick’ (Ibid.)

He instructs that ‘cunning above all,’ ‘courage,’ ‘perseverance’ and ‘resoluteness’ (Ibid.) are the virtues which must be adopted so that

‘The little people can’t stay beaten for ever’ (Ibid.)

Rendra’s cynicism of the ruling elite is most evident in this vituperate poem.

‘Strive to meet a minister

and to be his mistress.....’ (Ibid.)

‘as long as you are vigorous and your breasts firm

This always attracts them

your idle chatter will be of no account

as long as you are spirited, assured and quite confident

The very model of a minister in fact. (ibid.p.39)

The poet’s hope for the unborn child is that he be taught to fight. Future generations will have to be vigilant for

‘an enemy is evil always

And must be hit until he’s crushed

This is the essence of the art of self-survival’ (Ibid.)

His scathing assessments include denigration of the police as well as the military:

‘If he can, let him be a policeman or a soldier

So that he doesn’t have to buy rice

But gets it from the state

with a nice uniform’ (Ibid.p.41)

He ends this poem by reiterating how everything remains the same, day after day.

### **Rendra’s literary style**

The poetic styles Rendra used to voice his social criticism were dominated by a narrative approach in free verse; some of his poems are ballad-like in structure. Within this structure, he uses the rhythm and beat of words and the repetition of words to create mood and to accentuate the nature of human responses to passionate action. Sometimes his use of sounds in this way is similar to those he may well have used in creating dialogue and atmosphere in his plays. This is apparent in the poem, ‘*Khotbah*’ (*Sermon*) in which words form beats that are played out and repeated in rhythms to accentuate the message.

His poetry incorporated the use of numerous poetic techniques including metaphors, similes, double entendres, repetitions, paradoxes, ironic twists, rhetorical questions, ironies,

and satire. He would vehemently castigate the masses as well as their oppressors with his cutting use of these devices.

The nature of the Indonesian language promotes the use of repetition as plural nouns are repeated. Rendra uses this to his poetic advantage. The hard/soft/hard/soft cadence of Indonesian speech produces a regular beat. Repetition and rhythm is evident in the following from *Sajak Burung-Burung Kondor (Birds Condor 1973)*:

Beribu-ribuburungkondor,  
berjuta-jutaburungkondor,  
bergerakmenujukegunungtinggi,  
dandisanamendapathiburandarisepi.  
Karenahanyasepi  
mampumenghisapdendamdansakithati.

Thousands of condors,  
millions of condors,  
move toward the high mountains,  
and there get entertainment from deserted.  
Because only lonely  
able to suck revenge and hurt.

The repetition of these numbers in Indonesian and the allied alliteration pronounces a musical beat like that of the heart. Thus, the rhythmic oral delivery sounds similar to a drumbeat urging audiences to internalize the meanings and to follow the drummer boy.

He frequently used loathsome animals as metaphors. In his poem, 'Khotbah' ('Sermon'), he describes the Indonesian people '*Sebagaiseklompokserigala yang malasdanlapar*' ('Like a flock of hungry lazy jackals') (Avelling p.4); in '*Pemandangansenjakala 1968,*' ('Twilight View') '*Sekolompokanjing liar*' ('A pack of wild dogs') (Ibid. p.44) and '*Kelelawar-kelelawarraksasa*' ('vampire bats') (Ibid.). These are all mean and dastardly animals not deserving of empathy and his subjects are justified by such ugly comparisons.

His words could also be heartfelt and deeply moving:

'The wind's heart ached  
as it watched the sad strides of peasant labourers,  
working on fertile land,  
which did not give them prosperity' (Rendra cited in Lane, 2009)

This translated stanza may not have the same soft, simple musical tones of the Indonesian language version; however, it still captures the sorrow and exhaustion of the people. His

observations of the poor stated their downtrodden existence and also imbued them with the spirit of regal birds such as eagles and condors, even when they were overwhelmed by anguish and pain.

In his early poetry, Rendra writes of human suffering in a sympathetic voice and his style is influenced by the traditional song form of the *tembang*, a style of classical vocal music which is sung in free verse poetry (Literatuan 1976).

There is evidence also of the music of Negro Spirituals in the poem, *Khotbah (Sermon)*, integrated with the chant of the Balinese *Kecak* monkey dance. Such an approach is indicative of his sense of drama in writing and performance (Literatuan 1976). The repetition and sing-song aspects are hypnotizing as are many such American religious events. It imbues religious-style verve to the cant of such political promises.

With the translation process, not all poetic nuances can be transcribed. The cultural context with regard to the way the writer feels at that time and place cannot be wholly translated. The link between language and what has been described as 'an outside reality' hinders any form of equivalence when translating. The shades of language which include the colloquial language, its structure and musicality cannot always be retained in the process of translation. It is as if a new poem is created in the best possible conversion from the original (Heald 2001).

### **The impact of his poetry**

Once the ban on performing was lifted, Rendra resumed performing and reading, starring in his own eight-hour long play, *Panembahan Reso*, a work centred on the succession of power in Indonesia. In his later years, Rendra received numerous literary awards, including the Art of the Indonesia Government award in 1970, the Prize of the Academy Jakarta, and the Main Book Prize of the Ministry of Education and Culture in 1976 ([www.pippoeetry.blogspot.com.au/2010/11/w-s-rendra](http://www.pippoeetry.blogspot.com.au/2010/11/w-s-rendra).)

Rendra lived through a momentous time during the 1960s and 1970s, both politically and culturally, for the Indonesian people. He was seen as one of the writers who had been credited with modernizing Indonesian poetry and giving it life in what was a new adopted national language (Hatleey 2009). He gave voice to the anger of the young adult generation who had enthusiastically supported the rise to power of the New Order, only to end up feeling betrayed by its corruption, authoritarianism and its lack of concern for any social equity. (Hatleey 2009)

Rendra contributed to social change by creating public spaces for political opposition to the government. His theatre and poetry reading performances gave voice to the thoughts and feelings of his audiences and these were unprecedented in the time of the New Order. His ability to attract large numbers of people generated political rallies in a sense. He popularized poetry in ways which had not been previously used in Indonesia (Febriansyah p.15). However, whilst his poetry often spoke of the struggles of the poorer classes, it was difficult for such people to actually attend his readings.

Rendra was the principal voice against the dictatorship and injustice in the 1970s, and yet, he remained very wary of attempts to create institutionalized protest. He believed that, as a poet, he must be a “voice from the wind,” beyond the reach of any organized political force (Lane 2009).

Whilst Rendra was committed to writing about the daily struggles of the poorer classes, it was not from personal experience. In his poem, *Orang-orang Miskin (Poor People 1978)*, he is urging attention to their plight but he refers to them as ‘they,’ placing himself outside of their experience (Febriansyah p.30).

‘They have lost their battles

They are tantalized by their dreams’ (Aveling 2001:151)

His poems were symbolically critical of oppression and he subjectively interpreted such experiences. He used artistic perception rather than a social viewpoint. His poor people are stereotyped by such phrases as ‘living in the gutters,’ and ‘the clattering melee’. They are mere ‘Grass and moss beside the highway’ (Ibid.).

## **Conclusion**

Rendra lived through a politically turbulent era of Indonesian history. The authoritarian New Order did not hesitate to silence those who bravely expressed artistic opposition. Such repression gave voice to the poet and dramatist, Rendra, who articulated the populous’ social criticisms of the times. His words spoke of disparities: wealth and poverty, privileged and the downtrodden, the law and reality, cruelty and compassion.

During the period 1973 to 1978, Rendra was influential in opposing Suharto’s dictatorship. He did this through the performance of his plays and his energetic and dramatic public poetry readings. Imprisonment for his opposition did not deter him; instead it added experience and fire to his writing. Following Rendra’s death, commentators reflected upon the impact of his words during those years of political upheaval.

Rendra had been outspoken and prolific, which had made him a powerful opponent to the government. He went to the streets and screamed his disagreement. (Barley 2009)

The influence Rendra had was still a notable quality 30 years later: ‘In 1978, Rendra was in the vanguard of protest against social injustice and military dictatorship (Lane, 2009)’. The impact of his words led to his clashes with the New Order and eventually him being muzzled by the regime for 7 years. He was highly critical and outspoken, but also very lyrical in his language, passionate, persuasive, bold and unflinching in the power of his convictions.

With the political censorship of the times and the distortion of history in schools, Rendra’s poetry written in the 1970s was doomed not to be a nationwide phenomenon. However, it will be interesting to analyse the enduring power of his poetry as Indonesia broadens its democratic development into the 21st century. Whilst he is best remembered

for his flamboyant dissidence, his dramatic poetry readings and his arrests (Lane 2010), it will be his words which hopefully will stand as a benchmark of democracy.

Rendra lived to see a far more democratic Indonesia emerge. Whilst there were still injustices to address, corruption and poverty; the political context had become far more open. Whilst his writing was dramatic, it was also a lyrical and narrative in style. His work was marked by one inherent question which went to the core of his political protestations with regard to the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, good and evil, right and wrong,

Yes! there are the triumphant, there are the humiliated  
There are those with guns, there are those with wounds.  
There are those who sit, there are those who are sat upon.  
There are those with abundance, those with nothing left.  
And on whose side do you stand? (Lane, 2009)

As an Indonesian and as a writer, Rendra fought for freedom of expression under both the regimes of Sukarno and Suharto. His legacy is his words.

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