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## In memoriam Sapardi Djoko Damono

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## Obituaries

*In memoriam Sapardi Djoko Damono*  
*Solo, 20 March 1940 – Jakarta, 19 July 2020*



Photograph by Darwis Triadi, 2019.<sup>1</sup>

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On Sunday, July 19, 2020, at 09:17, a friend, teacher, literary expert, and a great writer adored by many, Sapardi Djoko Damono (SDD), passed away in Jakarta. Shrouded in unease and silence, an already corona-stricken Indonesia has had to let go of this great poet with a heavy heart but with the consolation of reminiscing about his work and loyalty. “The day will come/when my dreams are no longer known/but in the spaces found in the letters of this poem/I will never tire of looking for you” (SDD, *Pada suatu hari nanti/‘The day will come’* 1991, translated by John McGlynn).

During the few breaks amid his busy, scheduled workplans, he admitted that, because of his deteriorating health, he was having to make regular “hospital rendezvous”. Undoubtedly, many can neither believe nor accept his death, because his soft, humble, lyrical, and imagistic poems have long been such a powerful source not only of motivation, but also creativity and freedom of thought – even among junior high school students in Indonesia.

Sapardi was born in Surakarta on March 20, 1940, into a noble Javanese family under the name R. Sapardi Djoko Damono Mangun Sadyoko, a child of M. Sadyoko and Mrs Sapariah. His death was preceded by those of his wife Wardiningsih in 2019 and his son Rizki (a graduate of the English Study Program in the Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia) in February

<sup>1</sup> My sincere thanks to Sonya Sondakh for providing this photograph.

2020, leaving a daughter named Ani (a graduate of the History Study Program in the Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia). Raised in a secure but stimulating environment with his hometown friends, he attended the Sekolah Rakyat Kasatrian, a special school for the sons of the Surakarta aristocracy. During his education there in Kromo Javanese, he delighted in lessons in singing, dancing, gamelan, and wayang. After graduating with excellent marks from Margoyudan High School, Sapardi majored in English Literature at Universitas Gadjah Mada. It was here that the young Sapardi began his journey into the world of Indonesian Literature. He immersed himself in the arts, was recognized as a prolific academician and became the Dean of Faculty of Literature Universitas Indonesia (FSUI). As a literary expert, not only did he write poetry, prose, and drama, his translations of literary works were of excellent quality. As an academician, he also wrote an unending stream of great academic works, even in his final days.

When I first met Sapardi he had just begun teaching in the Faculty of Literature Universitas Indonesia (FSUI), whose name – his idea and suggestion – has now been changed into the Faculty of Humanities (FIB UI). At the time, he had just returned from his two-year study in Honolulu, Hawai'i, USA. This was round about the year of 1973. Although I could not attend his lectures (which were famous for being interesting and eye-opening) as I was in the last months of my own study, I am still grateful for the opportunities I had to witness the way he worked and thought in both formal and informal meetings. With his first collection of poetry *Dukamu abadi* (Your eternal sorrow, 1969) compulsory reading in classes, it was easy to have a conversation with him by alluding to his lines (which, frankly speaking, to this day apart from dozens of his other poetry books, still grant me new enlightenment and generate new questions).

As a kind, simple person, he speaks with a distinct sense of calmness – without any hint of pretention or exaggeration. He preferred to listen and, if necessary, he would add something which unexpectedly answered questions I had been struggling to formulate. Since he was fond of and actively involved himself in the theatre during his time as a student in Yogyakarta (to the point that he became a member of WS Rendra Theatre Group), we had a conversation about *Petang di taman*/Dusk in the park (Iwan Simatupang), which he directed, and *A marriage proposal*/Pinangan (Anton Chekov), in which he acted. Without any prompting, he told stories of books about theatre and gave me his personal notes on different topics ranging from acting, showtime, synonyms, his favourite professor when he was a student, to music. Just as he always did throughout his career, during his conversations with colleagues, students, or whoever came to him, he motivated and inspired me with his clear vision, encouraging me to persevere and flower in my own work.

At this moment – remembering his way of working and his life, knowing how much effort Sapardi made to develop literature in Indonesia through his contributions to a society he loved – as I am writing about his passing, I am still in shock. I am suddenly very conscious of the priceless murmurs

and messages of his poems which brought inanimate things to life with such finesse – the very poems which talked about time, eternity, journeys of self-discovery, spirituality, and death. For him, poetry was life itself: something worth fighting for, something deserving to be served by offering one's utmost best. Please ponder with me on these quotations from *Dongeng Marsinah* (*Marsinah's tale*, 2000, translated by Alvin Steviro).

/1/

Marsinah buruh pabrik arloji,  
mengurus presisi:  
merakit jarum, sekrup, dan roda gigi;  
waktu memang tak pernah kompromi,  
ia sangat cermat dan pasti.

/1/

Marsinah a worker in a watch factory,  
managing precision:  
assembling hands, screws and cogs;  
time never really compromises,  
it is extremely meticulous and sure.

Marsinah itu arloji sejati,  
tak lelah berdetak  
memintal kefanaan  
yang abadi:  
"kami ini tak banyak kehendak,  
sekedar hidup layak,  
sebutir nasi".

Marsinah is a true watch,  
never stops ticking  
weaving ephemerality  
which is eternal:  
"we wish for nothing much,  
just a proper life,  
a grain of rice".

/2/

Marsinah, kita tahu, tak bersenjata,  
ia hanya suka merebus kata  
sampai mendidih,  
lalu meluap ke mana-mana.  
"Ia suka berpikir", kata Siapa,  
"itu sangat berbahaya".

/2/

Marsinah, we knew, was not armed,  
she only liked words  
to boil,  
and spill over.  
"She likes to think", says Who,  
"that is very dangerous".

Marsinah tak ingin menyulut api,  
ia hanya memutar jarum arloji  
agar sesuai dengan matahari.  
"Ia tahu hakikat waktu", kata Siapa,  
"dan harus dikembalikan  
ke asalnya, debu",

Marsinah never wished to set anything alight,  
she only set the watch hands  
to align with the sun.  
"She knows the nature of time", says Who,  
"and she must be returned  
to dust, from whence she came".

Apart from taking the positions of the Executive Director of Yayasan Indonesia, the Managing Editor of the literary magazine *Horison*, a member of Dewan Kesenian Jakarta (Jakarta Arts Council), a judge in many literary and cultural competitions, with his colleagues from Universitas Indonesia, he published a quarterly journal *Puisi* (1997) and held the Annual SiH Awards for the best poetry published in *Puisi*. Throughout his academic career, he was Head of the Postgraduate Literature Program of the Faculty of Literature UI, Dean Assistant III, Dean Assistant I, Dean of the Faculty of Literature UI (1995-1999) and he was appointed a full-time professor in Universitas Indonesia's Faculty of Literature, before retiring in 2005. After his retirement, Sapardi became a full-time lecturer at the Institut Kesenian Jakarta/Institute of Arts

postgraduate program. Until his death, he actively taught and supervised graduate and postgraduate students of Universitas Indonesia's Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Gadjah Mada's Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Diponegoro's Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Padjajaran's Faculty of Humanities, Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, and Institut Kesenian Jakarta.

As an academician, Sapardi focused his research and teaching on the analysis of poetry, the sociology of literature, comparative literature, intermediality and the history of literature. With such diverse research interests, unsurprisingly Sapardi published a myriad of academic works, such as *Sosiologi sastra; Pengantar ringkas*/A brief introduction to the sociology of literature (1978), *Puisi Indonesia sebelum kemerdekaan*/Pre-independence Indonesian poems (2003), *Bilang begini maksudnya begitu; Buku apresiasi puisi*/Say something, mean another; A book of the appreciation of poetry (2014), et cetera.

Known as a prolific and voracious reader, he became an editor of the magazines *Basis* and *Kalam*, a correspondent of the journal *Indonesia Circle* (SOAS, University of London) and, in his final days, a peer reviewer for academic journals in numerous universities in Indonesia. As a lover, an observer, and a writer of drama, Sapardi was also a member of the Editorial Board for all four volumes of *Antologi drama Indonesia 1895-2000*/Anthology of Indonesian drama 1895-2000 (2006), published by Yayasan Lontar. On top of being a member of *Konsorsium Sastra dan Filsafat*, Sapardi was the Head of Humanities Commission, a member of the Council of Research for Higher Education, the Directorate General of Higher Education, Kemendikbud (Department of Education and Culture).

Sapardi was the author of a number of fictional works. Among his poems are *Dukamu abadi*/Your eternal sorrow (1969), *Ada berita apa hari ini, Den Sastro?*/What's the news today, Den Sastro? (2002), and *Namaku Sita*/My name is Sita (2012). His prose works include *Membunuh orang gila*/Killing a madman (2003), *Tirani demokrasi*/The tyranny of democracy (2014), and *Yang fana adalah waktu*/Time is mortal (2018). He also published *Ditunggu Dogot*/Awaited by Dogot (2015). He was also a skilled translator. Among his translation works are '*Lelaki tua dan laut*' (1973)/*The old man and the sea* (Ernest Hemingway), '*Puisi klasik Cina*' (1976)/*Classical Chinese Poems*, and '*Pembunuhan di Katedral*' (1976)/*Murder in the Cathedral* (T.S. Eliot).

Sapardi's poems have been translated into many languages including English, Dutch, Mandarin, Japanese, French, Urdu, Hindi, German, Arabic, and Mexican Spanish. In 1986, three of his essays and a number of his poems were translated and published in Japan as a world literature publication. *Water color poems* (1986) and *Before dawn* (2005), for instance, were translated by John McGlynn. In 1988, a number of his poems which had been translated into English by John McGlynn were published under the title *Suddenly the night* by Yayasan Lontar – an organization which Sapardi also co-founded. His poems *Hujan sihir*/'*Black magic rain*' (1994) was translated by Harry G. Aveling.

His outstanding and unceasing works brought Sapardi great recognition

and many awards, such as Anugerah Puisi Putera from Malaysia (1983), Hadiah Sastra ASEAN (1986), and Kusala Sastra Khatulistiwa Award for the non-fiction category (2004). In 2018, he received the ASEAN Book Award for his books *Hujan bulan Juni* (June rain) and *Yang fana adalah waktu* (Time is mortal). Sapardi is also the first Indonesian writer who to have received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Indonesia Institute (2003), Akademi Jakarta (2012), and the Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia (2017).

After such a long list of work, on which highlights can we focus and what insights are we given? Unquestionably, Sapardi was a person who was not only chosen to live in a world of colours, but also given opportunities to witness such a world before transcribing it into a written form so that it can be read by the society which gave him his birth. Although he began writing poems at a very young age, in his golden years he was still creating works with undiminished intensity and quality. His attitude of “treating objects as friends” and his appreciation of equality which allowed him to become such a dynamic writer, one who could turn this complex life into lyrical language, educate students, write academic publications, guide people, and live a kindly and cordial life in a millennial society. His life was in a constant state of simultaneously receiving and giving, and such life made him an inspiration for many.

Many would call and remember Sapardi as a poet. However, his short stories, novels, essays, textbooks, worksheets, research reports, translations, and dramas possess an equally exquisite quality. In 1987, Sapardi organized his former students to commence setting his poems to music. Through the medium of music, his lyrical poems embellished by his recognizable choice of words have become loved by even more people, including students who are currently in Junior High School. His skillful talent for literary adaptation transformed *Hujan bulan Juni*, a poem originally published in 1989, into different media: a song, a picture book, a colouring book, a novel and a film released in 2018. This dynamic capability to transform is readily found throughout many of his works. Here, Sapardi’s works seem to speak a longing for an unceasing metamorphosis, as did the writer who wished to keep on writing in a meaningful way.

We must also not forget that, in 1988, Sapardi founded the Himpunan Sarjana-Kesusastraan Indonesia (HISKI) and served as its general chairman for three periods. As an educator and a (social) scientist, he was concerned about “the scarcity of literary scholars who are making unceasing efforts to engage intensively with the world of literature”. His desire was for “improving the quality of literary scholars, especially those who dedicate themselves to the world of education”. This statement reveals his concerns about and hopes and dreams of the development of not just literature itself, but the people involved – be they scholars, teachers or, most importantly, students, and the general public. In the end, all he dreamed about was how literature could come alive among, develop, and humanize people.

In his youth, Sapardi decided to teach Indonesian Literature in Universitas

Indonesia. This profession allowed him to pass on his great and abundant knowledge of Western Literature to a wider public. After all, as mentioned above, he translated many foreign literary works. Both his teaching and his translations have introduced not only life itself, but also how to look at it from different perspectives. I think this is what Sapardi fought for throughout his career. Here lies his great contribution to Indonesian Literature and his country. He taught us how to understand and enjoy literature while making it a place for questions, meditation, or consolation. And with his intensive way of working throughout his life, he set an example of how to contribute to the society as oneself by doing and giving one's best. He created literary works, educated people, inspired and inspires many, self-published, and he was always happy to gift his writings (wherever he went he would give his books away to whoever he happened to meet). Moreover, he collaborated with many students, even the millennials: a future generation who will continue to live on beyond his range of vision.

I have mentioned how the young Sapardi was so fond of drama. Now that he has passed away, he has become immortalized as Indonesia's leading poet. Joko Pinurbo (2010) even dubbed him "one of the most important prophets in the world of Indonesian literature". Personally, I shall always see him as a man of the theatre. With gifts of vision, interpretation, musicality, voice, motion, language, and spatial awareness, he has left us with works of poetry, prose, and drama which represent ourselves and our lives.

Farewell, Pak Sapardi. Through these lines, we now understand that your passionate life has strengthened in us the will to give meaning to everything "ephemeral".

*Pada suatu hari nanti,  
jasadku tak akan ada lagi,  
tapi dalam bait-bait sajak ini,  
kau tak akan kurelakan sendiri.*

The day will come  
when my body no longer exists  
but in the lines of this poem  
I will never let you be alone.

*Pada suatu hari nanti,  
suaraku tak terdengar lagi,  
tapi di antara larik-larik sajak ini  
kau akan tetap kusiasati,*

The day will come  
when my voice is no longer heard  
but within the words of this poem  
I will continue to watch over you,

*Pada suatu hari nanti,  
impianku pun tak dikenal lagi,  
namun di sela-sela huruf sajak ini,  
kau tak akan letih-letihnya mencari.*

The day will come  
when my dreams are no longer known  
but in the spaces found in the letters of this poem  
I will never tire of looking for you.

(SDD, *Pada suatu hari nanti*/'The day will come' 1991,  
translated by John McGlynn)