

Ramayda Akmal

## *When spirits and mortals dance*

*Magical realism and postcoloniality in Kereta Semar Lembu (2022)*



Illustration: Vince Trommel

*In the section ‘On the Bookshelf’, various figures from the literary world present their arguments on why a particular author or text merits renewed attention. This time, author and literary scholar Ramayda Akmal highlights Zaky Yamani’s novel Kereta Semar Lembu (2022). Akmal argues that, up to now, the post- and decolonial force of the novel’s magical realist aspects has been largely overlooked. She analyses how these magical elements disrupt the hegemony of the rationalist colonial paradigm – exposing the reader to an alternative understanding of history.*

*In de rubriek ‘In de Kast’ bepleiten uiteenlopende figuren uit de wereld der letteren waarom een bepaalde auteur of tekst opnieuw de volle aandacht verdient. Ditmaal belicht schrijver en literatuurwetenschapper Ramayda Akmal de roman Kereta Semar Lembu (2022) van Zaky Yamani. Akmal betoogt dat de sterke post- en dekoloniale kracht die van de magisch-realistische aspecten uitgaat, nog grotendeels over het hoofd is gezien. Ze analyseert hoe deze magische elementen breken met de hegemonie van het rationalistische koloniale paradigma, en zodoende de lezer blootstellen aan een alternatieve visie op de geschiedenis.*

The publication of Zaky Yamani’s novel *Kereta Semar Lembu* [*The Train of Semar Lembu*] (2022) contributes to Indonesia’s rich literary tradition of magical realism. This genre first appeared in the world of painting and was introduced in 1925 by the German art critic Franz Roh, which then spread to other fields of art. The essence of this genre is the existence of a fantasy or mystery dimension in realist objects (Bowers 2004: 23-24). In other words, the magical and the realist are not strictly separated and coexist side by side. In Indonesia, one of the earliest literary works associated with this genre is a collection of short stories entitled *Godlob* (1975) written by Danarto (1941-2018). Later, through the works of Eka Kurniawan the discussion about this genre reached its peak in Indonesia – particularly Kurniawan’s novel *Cantik itu Luka* [*Beauty is a Wound*] (2002) has been considered a prime example of Indonesian magical realism.

The publication of *Kereta Semar Lembu* is one of the latest developments within the genre. Yamani’s novel was placed first in the Jakarta Arts Council Novel Competition in 2021 for its portrayal of Indonesia’s history, starting from the nineteenth century, seamlessly weaving together elements of both the realist and the magical world

(Dewan Kesenian Jakarta / Jakarta Arts Council n.a. 2022). Following its publication, numerous discussions of the novel emerged in the mass media and academic circles (cf. Safutra 2022; Zahran 2023; Maulidiyah 2024). Most of the discussions centred around the novel's setting, which encompasses several historical events, stimulating reflection on colonialism and violence in Indonesia over the past two centuries, and thereby adding to a vibrant cultural memory. Although some discussions have emphasised the Javanese philosophy that shapes the characters' responses to these events, the use of magical realism as a narrative strategy has remained one of the most widely discussed themes in the novel. Unfortunately, the meaningful connection between magical realism and post- and decolonial forces has been overlooked within these discussions.

Hence, this essay will interpret the novel by focusing on the relationship between magical realism and postcoloniality. In this context, reading and exploring the characters, objects and events in this novel – which often defy and destabilise logical, empirical and rationalist verification – enables readers to become aware of ongoing coloniality: colonial forms of logic and thinking that still continue to wield influence today. *Kereta Semar Lembu* thereby offers readers a portrait of contemporary Indonesian society with an alternative perception of its history and future.

### **Lembu and historical events in the novel**

The novel begins with the protagonist, a ghost named Lembu, who finally finds release into the afterlife after wandering in limbo for fifty years. Having been accused of being a communist, Lembu was cruelly killed in the course of the Indonesian mass killings in 1965. His body remained unidentified and was denied proper burial rites and prayers, leading to the entrapment of his spirit. Eventually, someone discovered Lembu's remains and conducted a careful reburial, allowing him to pass into eternity. On the eve of bidding farewell to thousands of spirits who shared similar fates, Lembu recounts his life story, which coincides with the history of Indonesia starting from the nineteenth century.

Lembu was born in 1865, a year after the Dutch colonial government initiated the railroad construction in Java. His mother was a prostitute who provided services to the project's labourers, one of whom was his father. Lembu's life journey became intricately interwoven with major historical events in Indonesia. He witnessed the first railroad operation in Java in 1867, survived the eruption of Mount Merapi in 1872 and Mount Krakatau in 1883, and endured the Spanish flu pandemic in Java around 1918-1920. Moreover, he witnessed the national awakening moments of the Youth Pledge and the establishment of various political organisations at that time. During the Japanese occupation, he experienced

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forced labour and crossed paths with notable figures like Sneevliet, Koesno (Soekarno), Semaun, H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto, and others. Lembu was also drawn into the political activities of the Indonesian Communist Party, until his untimely demise during the party's suppression.

Lembu's story offers a subaltern perspective on significant historical events, illustrating how the marginalised or working class perceived and were subjected to power, not just as part of the colonial rule but also in a broader historical context. How does a commoner like Lembu view the elite? How does Lembu, as a colonised subject, consider the Dutch as colonisers? These questions form the basic premise of the novel. Moreover, by presenting it from the perspective of individuals whose existence transcends mundane reality, Lembu's story illuminates parts of Indonesian history that are difficult to explain through formal historical discourse. Additionally, by exploring Lembu's story, readers enter the world of magical realism – perceiving and contemplating history through one of the primary features of contemporary Indonesian fiction.

### **Magical realism and postcolonial strategies**

Lembu was born next to the railroad tracks in a Javanese village. Beside him, his mother simultaneously gave birth to a magical rattle which enabled Lembu to communicate with the supernatural world. From his early childhood, Lembu could see and interact with spirits. He never questioned this coexistence of the real world and the magical world, as if there were no barrier or difference between them. For example, at the beginning of the novel, the four-year-old Lembu witnesses humans and spirits joyously dancing and participating in the *ronggeng* dance, which he perceives as entirely ordinary (Yamani 2022: 32). In this scene, a reader is confronted with a self-evident, almost natural hybridity between the mundane and the magical realm. This condition is equally reflected in another scene, when Lembu narrates the scene of his mother who is 'in touch' with the spirits of dead people:

Ibuku pun tak pernah terganggu dengan sosok bertubuh rusak yang tatapannya sangat kosong, dan selalu berdiri mengangkangi kepada ibuku selama dia bekerja. Kadang-kadang beberapa sosok aneh itu mencoba ikut memasukkan penis mereka ke selakangan ibuku. Tapi mereka tak pernah berhasil, dan akhirnya pergi dengan wajah murung ke tempat orang-orang bermain kartu atau ke tempat ronggeng.

[My mother was never bothered by the dilapidated figure with an empty gaze, who always stood astride my mother while she worked. Sometimes some of those strange figures tried to stick their penises into my mother's crotch. But they never succeeded, and ended up with gloomy faces going to where people play cards or to the ronggeng stage.] (Yamani 2022: 32 [own translation, RA]).

Furthermore, Lembu does not only exist between the world of humans and the world of spirits, but he also resides at the intersection of past and present, as shown by his

relationships with mystical beings. This co-existence is allowed by Lembu's lifespan extending far beyond the physiological limits of natural human life. In this liminal world, Lembu encounters spirits – ranging from the recently deceased, to those who have existed for millennia – blurring the temporal boundaries.

Lembu's body equally represents this hybridity. He ages so slowly that at the age of thirty, he still has the body of a child, enabling him to live up to a hundred years. Against this supernatural longevity, his body is cursed to never leave the side of the railroad tracks, limiting his life to train cars, stations, and tracks. In the context of colonialism, this scene can illustrate how the modernity brought by the colonisers to the natives, apart from promising enlightenment, simultaneously shackles them – just like the railroad tracks that restrain Lembu. However, the scene is given another layer by presenting a shackled Lembu as a magical person. This condition makes the local village community consider him as a spiritual leader. People visit him to ask for blessings and the removal of curses. Furthermore, he uses his supernatural abilities to deal with predicaments that are beyond the control of ordinary humans. For instance, when Dutch troops try to capture him, they are unable to move his body away from a train car:

'Jangan macam-macam, anjing!' bentak tentara yang membawaku. 'Kalau kau tak mau bergerak, aku tempatk kepalamu!' 'Tapi Meneer,' jawabku. 'kakiku memang tak bisa dibawa pergi. Coba saja kalau Meneer bisa.' Aku dipukuli sampai tersungkur di pelataran stasiun. Ketika aku hendak diseret keluar, tentara itu tak bisa menyeretku pergi. 'Sihir apa yang kaugunakan, anjing!'

['Don't mess around, dog!' snapped the soldier who took me. 'If you don't want to move, I'll shoot you in the head!' 'But Meneer,' I answered. 'My legs can't be taken away. Just try it if you can.' I was beaten until I fell down in the station yard. When I was about to be dragged out, the soldiers couldn't drag me away. 'What magic did you use, you dog!'] (Yamani 2022: 231 [own translation, R.A])

The term 'magic' above references a power that the colonisers do not comprehend. This 'magic' furthermore symbolises resilience in the face of colonial oppression. Similarly, during the Battle of Surabaya against the British, Lembu's body proves immune to weapons, making him immortal (Yamani 2022: 209). Thus, his body, which transcends the real, contrasts the portrayal of bodies in realist novels, where any magical phenomenon only appears as a metaphor for human response to external forces beyond their control (Faris 2004: 137-138).

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The aforementioned events contain uncertainties and elements that defy rational logic. Therefore, they often challenge the understanding and authority of the dominant colonial rationalism. At various points, the rationalist characters who confront Lembu often dismiss him as insane and hallucinatory, attempting to rationalise Lembu's condition without success. As Sneevliet, a Dutch communist politician who founded the Indische Sociaal-Democratische Vereeniging (ISDV) in the Dutch East Indies in 1914 met Lembu, he said:

'Aku pikir kau orang gila, Lembu. Tapi orang gila yang sangat cerdas,' katanya. 'Kisah-kisahmu merupakan ramuan imajinasi anak-anak yang sangat liar, bermacam-pur dengan pengalaman orang dewasa yang sangat liar. Merambah ke segala hal, sampai ke dunia mistis orang-orang Jawa.'

['I think you are a madman, Lembu. But a very intelligent madman,' he said. 'Your stories are a wild concoction of children's imaginations mixed with wild adult experiences. Reaching everything, right down to the mystical world of the Javanese. They go into everything.'](Yamani 2022: 130 [own translation, RA])

The Indonesian term 'liar' (meaning: wild) that is used by Sneevliet here captures a sense of being out of control. The term stresses how the colonial power is trying to impose a certain rationality on its colonised subject in order to understand and 'tame' it. To be 'wild', therefore, is to be 'untamed', thereby reappropriating a colonial framework – a binary opposition between nature and culture, wilderness and civilisation – in an emancipatory manner.

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### **A new understanding of history**

In these irreducible spaces, new voices emerge that can destabilise these dominant views, particularly regarding Indonesian history. As Wendy B. Faris, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, suggests, magical realism not only aims to reflect history, but also to alter it (2004: 138). Through Lembu's experiences, readers are exposed to an alternative understanding of history. Indonesian history becomes entangled with Lembu's personal narrative, conveyed through myths, rumours, and even prophecies. For example, on the day of his mother's death, the eighth of June 1921 (which coincides with Suharto's birthday), he foretells that a baby born on the same day as his mother died is to become 'the nation's worst killer' (Yamani 2022: 157). Another example is the presence of the character Koesno (Soekarno's childhood nickname), who frequents Lembu's services when working as a massager. Described as a

charismatic young man passionate about independence, Lembu predicts that Koesno will be disliked by many due to his weakness for beautiful women (Yamani 2022: 161). While this information aligns with common knowledge, the presentation of this version of history challenges conventional historical narratives. History becomes an everyday, relatable story, transitioning into a myth.

In the novel, magical realism also serves to emphasise atrocities and violence throughout history. Since his childhood, Lembu and those around him have been exposed to violence, witnessing people being killed, only to return as ghosts. In Lembu's daily life, ghosts – being the former victims of deadly violence – casually appear: men with weird faces, fractured heads, shattered chests, or holes in their stomachs (Yamani 2022: 32). Violence, death, and life become a close circle which share the same space. As Lembu reflects:

Tak ada satu pun pernah merasakan kehilangan seseorang di sini. Karena esok malamnya, lelaki yang ususnya terburai itu sudah ikut menari lagi di arena ronggeng, bersama penari yang sama, menimpali tarian lelaki yang membunuhnya.

[No one here has ever felt the loss of someone. The very next night, the man whose intestines were spilled out danced once more on the ronggeng stage, alongside the man who killed him.] (Yamani 2022: 34 [own translation, RA])

The quote above demonstrates the close proximity of the world of the living, and the world of the dead. The boundaries between victim and perpetrator become blurred and fluid, enhancing the horror of the violence throughout Indonesian history.

### Conclusion

As we have seen, the novel's blending of realist and magical aspects points to efforts of weakening the rationalist colonial paradigm, which is confined to a linear focus on the future and material progress. This blending of the magical and the mundane represents resiliency in front of colonial oppression, especially through the notion of the magical being 'untamed'. Lembu's relationship with the spirits, his journey through time, and the train that traverses the Island of Java by soaring into the sky, all disrupt this colonial paradigm. In this state of liminality and mixing, the concepts of future or linear time are no longer relevant. At its core, the novel strives to assert agency over Indonesia's historical narrative. It vividly portrays history and links it with local events, which in their particular context are intimate, fantastic, and sacred – presenting its readers with multifaceted and unreduced layers of history, colonialism and time.

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