

An Aesthetic of Framing and Deframing: Notes on Takdir Alisyahbana and Latiff Mohidin

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"In front of these images, one asks oneself: is the poem a picture or the picture a poem?" – Rilke.

Simon Soon, from the Universiti Malaya, asks me if I can discuss the works and ideas of Sutan Takdir Alihsjahbana and Latiff Mohidin, two iconic figures in our region's cultural landscape. Simon sees it as a way to examine "the artistic, literary and intellectual cross-fertilization between Indonesia and Malaysia".

I am not sure if I can do the job. But let me try.

1

As you all know, the late Takdir Alisyahbana is the leading member of Indonesia's "New Poets" (*Poejangga Baroe*) of the 1930s. Latiff Mohidin, the eminent Malaysian painter and poet, on the other hand, needs no introduction. His works are being exhibited right here in this gallery. I must say, to place Takdir and Latiff side by side is a curious juxtaposition. Therefore, my emphasis would, rather, employ comparison, instead of "cross fertilization."

Takdir and Latiff come from different eras. Takdir's formative period was before the Second World War, when Nusantara, particularly these two sides of the Strait, lived under European colonial subjugation and hegemony. Latiff Mohidin is a different story. Born in 1941, he began to produce his important works within a post-colonial South-East Asia, in the 1960-s, when Malaysia was beginning to assert its presence; it was a period of economic growth and political stability.

Takdir died in 1994, at the age of 84. He remains an indelible presence in Indonesia's intellectual life, but is no longer the catalyst he once was. His prolific years were in the 1930s, when he dominated the Indonesian literary landscape with his brilliant and controversial essays. He is, basically, an essayist. As far as I am concerned, his novels, as well as his poetry, are less interesting than his discursive writings. His pieces published in *Polemik Kebudayaan*, (an anthology of the 1935 debates on Indonesia's cultural orientations), are exemplary; they define Takdir's corpus of essays as a distinct voice in Indonesia's history of ideas: they articulate a vernacular zeal for modernity.

Latiff is by no means a commanding voice in his country's intellectual history. But his poetry and paintings remain esteemed cultural items in today's swirl of tastes. He is a witness to the continuing interface between the verbal and the visual.

As I see it, Latiff's poems often suggest an attempt to produce, as it were, scenes with words. The metaphors sometimes remind me of *chiaroscuro* drawings, with moments of darkness lurking between the clarity of meanings. Here is a part of his erotic poem:

tujuh lautan

satu gelombang

di pusar perutmu

berpusing

denyutan purba

memanggil namaku

kuturuni bukit

kutinggalkan padang luas

aku merangkak kembali

ke lubuk kelammu

In contrast to Latiff, Takdir's works practically have no link with the visual arts. The only time *Poejangga Baroe*, the journal he edited, is interested in painting is when Takdir writes, in two parts, biographical sketches of Mas Pirngadi, the Indonesian painter in the 1930s. Around that time, one of his poems speaks to a "Tuan Pirngadi" – a subject I will speak of more in the later part of this paper.

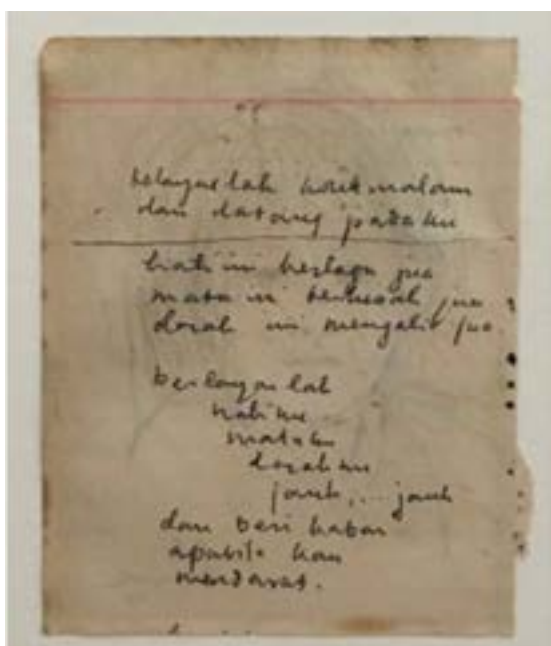
2

Let me begin with a moment of parallelism. Here is a quote from Latiff Mohidin's well-known poem:

belayarlah kolek malam

dan datang padaku

hati ini berlagu jua
mata ini berkisah jua
darah ini mengalir jua
belayarlah
hatimu
matamu
darahmu
jauh... jauh



■ Figure 1 – The original text of Latiff Mohidin's poem.

Latiff urges “the night boat” to sail, in its total self (“your heart, your eyes, your blood,”) to places far away. The metaphor of sailing suggests adventure and freedom – is very similar to Takdir's in his famous poem “Menuju ke Laut”. Let me quote the first three stanzas:

Kami telah meninggalkan engkau,
Tasik yang tenang tiada beriak,
diteduhi gunung yang rimbun,
dari angin dan topan.
Sebab sekali kami terbangun,
dari mimpi yang nikmat.

Ombak riak berkejar-kejaran
di gelanggang biru di tepi langit.
Pasir rata berulang di kecup,

tebing curam ditentang diserang,
dalam bergurau bersama angin,
dalam berlomba bersama mega.

Sejak itu jiwa gelisah
Selalu berjuang tiada reda.
Ketenagan lama serasa beku,
gunung pelindung rasa pengalang.
Berontak hati hendak bebas,
menyerang segala apa mengadang.

The poet sees himself as the spokesperson of his generation; Takdir uses the plural pronoun of *kami*. It is an announcement of rupture, or better, of revolt towards freedom (*berontak hati hendak bebas*, “our hearts rebel, wanting to be free”). “We” refuse to be attached to a calm, waveless lake, “protected from the storm and gale by a lush hill”. As with so much of modern Indonesian poetry, the sea – or in Takdir's words, “rollicking waves following each other...” – is a space of liberation. We remember that his most widely read novel, *Layar Terkembang*, implies a similar metaphor. So this is the parallelism. In their respective works – and I suspect in their general view of things as well – both Latiff and Takdir enact a eulogy of departure.

In Latiff's case, it is probably a return to the idea of *merantau*, or leaving home, a tradition practiced by young Minangkabau men in West Sumatra who depart from their birthplace to see the world. But I am not sure whether Latiff's wanderlust has something to do with his Minangkabau roots. I'd rather see Latiff as a peripatetic poet. The Greek word, *peripatetikos*, (as the legend has it), derives from Aristotle's habit of walking around while teaching – which I think is an apt description of Latiff's way of producing his art works and poetry. He crosses borders, just as most creative people do. He asks his “night boat” – an extension of his being – not to remain at stand still. It has to sail.

Takdir's poem is also a celebration of sailing, or rather of adventure – reaching a new horizon, meeting new challenges, generating a new world, discarding the old, protective, one. “The old tranquility is a frozen state”, the poem says, and “the sheltering hill is now a road block”.

At this point, his parallelism with Latiff's eulogy of departure stops. Takdir's advocacy for an exit has an exuberant tone; Latiff's voice is more sombre. Takdir's imaginary journey is buoyant – the waves evoke bursts of joy (“*bergurau bersama ombak*”) and

the expansive sea looks bright and blue (*"gelanggang biru"*) – Latiff's passage takes place at night, with a hint of uncertainty (*"jauh, jauh"*). The word *"apabila"* in the last stanza is ambiguous; it means "when" but also "if". The contrast is instructive. Let me say a little more of Takdir and his take on the art and poetry.

Takdir, in his early years, was a rebel with a cause. At the end, he is a rebel circumscribed by its very cause. His words are a distant echo of the European Enlightenment's cry, *Sapere aude!* It is a call to dare us to release ourselves from our "self-incurred tutelage", as Kant puts it – an 18th century appeal for modernity.

Like many advocates of modernity, Takdir sees the future as something no longer articulated in terms of the past (*"Kami telah meninggalkan engkau"*, we have left you behind...). The future becomes the focal point and a new organizing principle. The problem with this view is that it puts the movement of history in a linear image – even an orderly one.

This is already apparent in the way Takdir announces the thrust of his poem in the second stanza. His design to present the vivacious sea as a project against tranquility is marked by an underlying regularity; the second stanza is made of a measured cadence mostly in 10 syllables. There is neither shock nor spasm.

Deep down, you can discern the rhythm of certainty. The *telos*, the end of the process – or the cause propagated – determines the course of action. Takdir's journey is a predictable narrative of optimism. I believe this colours his choice of art

works. In 1934, *Poedjangga Baroe* published Takdir's essay on Pirngadi, probably the first Indonesian painter employing modern techniques.

Characteristically, he sees Pirngadi less as a great painter than as a man of the new era, a sample of Indonesia's "national awakening" (*kebanggoenan bangsa*) in the cultural scene, in the beginning of the 20th century. In other words, for Takdir, Pirngadi – like the *Poedjangga Baroe* group of writers – is a portrait of the artist as a solitary precursor.

"This is the fate of all great souls coming down too early to the earth, in a society split into two cultures. They are like towering, shady trees but having no root, they cling their trunks to the wood nearby. So weak is the prop supporting this greatness..."

Takdir's sympathy is with the painter's lack of social footing, but not necessarily with the aesthetic of his works. In the second part of his essay, I find his criticism to the point: In Pirngadi's paintings, he says, one can find neither "the audacity of phantasy," nor "emotion bouncing to the sky, in grief and ecstasy". Things of great wonders do not fascinate Pirngadi; his quiet joy is to observe the beauty of his land admiringly. "Pirngadi is not a painter of the tumultuous, of movement, of action. The ferment of the city does not appeal to him."

And yet, Takdir speaks eagerly of the painter's "abundant sense of beauty" (*hatinya berlimpah-limpahan perasaan keindahan*) and his skillful hands which enables him to "transform his simple surroundings into a song of the picturesque." No wonder that in a poem written in 1935, Takdir phrases his affinity with the painter:



■ Figure 2 – Pirngadi Painting

Ya, ya, Tuan Pirngadi,
Demikianlah ingatan beta kehendaki:
Muda gembira di puncak bahagia,
Berhias emas mempelai remaja
Dan penuh ria sinar segala.

Demikian ia hendak kubawa:
Matahari bersinar dilangit terang,
Memberi hidup menunda tenaga,
Selama mata belum tertutup,
Sebelum tangan tersusun...

This is, of course, not only a song of the beautiful, but an exaltation of the joy of life — typical of Takdir's enraptured view of history.

I sense that Takdir wants to assert what he considers is lacking in Pirngadi's paintings: the will to act, to transform the passivity of nature. The poet's is an activist's statement: "*Beta kehendaki*", (what I want); "*hendak kubawa*", (I'd like to take along, to bring about). But his words, using run-of-the-mill expressions, betray his affinity with the zone of conformity: "*Berhias emas mempelai remaja*", (adorned in

gold and glitter like a youthful bride), "*matahari bersinar di langit terang*", (the sun shining bright in the sky). Here, Takdir, the literary trail-blazer of 1930s, is virtually unrepresented. His ardour for the new is muffled. At the end of the day, Takdir and Pirngadi share the same pre-revolutionary ideal, or beau ideal, if you will. In Indonesia, they call it the paradigm of *Mooie Indie*.

4

In the late 1939, Soedjojono, Indonesia's leading modernist painter, who was later an important spokesman for the revolutionary élan of the 1940s, wrote a scathing comment on the kind of visual arts produced in colonial times. As he sees it, the predominant vogue is to depict "the Dutch Indies" not as a land of contradictions, of exploited peasants and worried workers, but as a rustic panorama with a pretty face. The canvas of Ernest Dezentje (1885-1972) is a case in point.

From here comes the disparaging label *Mooie Indie*, ("Beautiful East India"). To Soedjojono, who later became the leading painter of the Left, the *Mooie Indie* arts are works produced for people "who have never seen coconut trees and rice fields", or "tourists tired of their own skyscrapers". In another

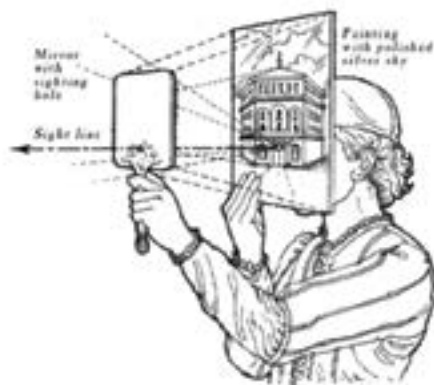


■ Figure 3 – Ernest Dezentje (1885-1972) painting, oil on canvas, 45 x 60 cm2.

essay published in 1946 he claims that in *Mooie Indie* paintings “all are completely nice and romantic like in Paradise, all are comfortable in every angle – peaceful, tranquil”.

It is this kind of landscape that pervades Takdir’s poetry (a vista “adorned in gold and glitter like a youthful bride”). But I must add, the bent is not for the beauty *per se*. Rather, it is the impulse for the congruous, linear, and purposive.

I believe it possesses the vestiges of the Dutch landscape painters – putatively progenitors of landscape paintings everywhere – whose canvases revel in the flat topography, endless lines of water, and placid sceneries. Above all, their fascination with linear perspective is not only connected to a contemporary scientific mode, but also to the idea of controlling space. “Realism” means portraying a unified *mis-en-scène*. I think there is a continuity between Bruneleschi’s geometrized representation of reality and the colonized other, just as there is a symmetry between the *Mooie Indie* canvases and the Dutch colonial administration in Indonesia. In a perceptive study of visual culture in the time of the Netherlands Indies, Susie Protschky points out that there is a frequent omission of “the negative impact of colonial expansion” in the art works. They shun “controversial realities”.



■ Figure 4 - Bruneleschi’s geometrized representation of reality.

I am not suggesting that Takdir’s literary writings brush off the social and intellectual defects of the colonial society. Yet like the *Mooie Indie* in the eye of Soedjojono (portraying the world in which “all is comfortable”), Takdir’s poetry finds no place in post-colonial Indonesia. The 1945 generation of writers denigrates this *Poedjangga Baroe* trait. Asrul Sani calls it a “literature of the stabilized middle class”, *gestabiliseerde burger*. What Takdir and the *Poedjangga Baroe* write “have the odor of a fresh shirt and the atmosphere of a flat life”.

Asrul Sani, who is, like Chairil Anwar, a brilliant writer of the revolutionary period of 1945, suspects that Takdir understands nothing of the turbulent times; Takdir only sees the revolution, Asrul says, merely as “foot-thumping on a Sunday morning”. Asrul Sani’s wit is definitely acerbic, but there is a glint of truth in it. Takdir is no fan of the revolution and its collateral zeal. “We cannot possibly rebel against everything, everybody”, he says. He stands against the fervor of the new poetry brought about by Chairil Anwar who famously claims himself a “*binatang jalang*”, “a wild beast”. In an interview published in 1947, Takdir compares Chairil’s poetry with “*rojak*”; it is fresh and exciting, but “you cannot make it the substance of human life”.

This is in line with his view of modernism in the visual arts. His disdain for the works of Picasso and Kandinsky has a typical bourgeois bent: he sees them as “irresponsible and aimless revolts.” His attacks on the modernists, both in the arts and literature, are fervid; they “cover themselves with a fog of mystery and obscure language,” he says, “so no common mortal can grasp what they mean”. As a result, Takdir says, “their cultural and social thrust will be utterly weak and skimpy”.

Ironically, the poet who celebrates the stride to liberty in his early poem is apparently the same man who could do with the confinement of creativity. To him, creativity should rather be the production of the useful – and not that of the new. Takdir’s impulse, as I said, is for the congruous, linear, and purposive. But this is precisely what the modernists in Indonesian arts and literature preferred to disregard, one way or another. I believe that it began with the Revolution (with a capital “R”).

The Indonesian revolution and the protracted war for independence in mid-1940s, as described by Pramoedya Ananta Toer in his novels, was the mother of metamorphosis. In *Di Tepi Kali Bekasi*, a fiction based on the writer’s combat experience in the battle along the Bekasi River, Pramoedya eulogizes the war as “an epic of a mental revolution”. As with what the slogans say on the city walls – painted surreptitiously by the guerrillas, addressed to the arriving Allied Force in late 1945 – the Revolution was a call for equality in a world shaped by layers of hierarchy. The “event” gave birth to an assertive subjectivity among the lower classes; it produced a shared opposition against the entrenched ideals of consensus.

Inevitably, it disrupted the notion of order and predictability; it challenged the usual narrative of “purpose”. It implied chaos, both creative and destructive. In his writings, Takdir prefers a chaos-free social transformation; as I suggested before, even his image of roaring waves has an element of regularity. His idea of modernity, based on what



■ Figure 5 – S. Soedjojono, “Seko”, oil on canvas, 1950.

Max Weber famously calls “instrumental reason”, is miles away from the post-colonial works of Soedjojono and Affandi, two foremost modernists in the history of Indonesian art. Let us have a look at Soedjojono’s painting, *Seko*, (oil on canvas, 1950).

The canvas is an attempt to capture a moment in the life of an unknown freedom fighter. He is a man with a gun standing against the ruins of battle. It is a painting of rupture. A tumultuous sky. A town that is no more. The guerilla, barefoot, carrying a rifle longer than his limbs and torso, is walking in a space that looks like a dubious track from nowhere. Everything is in a state of disruption.

Unlike typical revolutionary works by Chinese socialist artists, there is no bright light on the horizon; in fact, there is no horizon at all. The light is imbued with gloom. There is no clear sense of optimism, but neither is there any sign of despair. The painting sets itself against the logics of linearity. Other post-colonial works are two pieces by Affandi. One is a moment in a Yogyakarta street (oil on canvas, 1969).



■ Figure 6 – Affandi, “Andong”, oil on canvas, 1969.

An *andong*, the popular horse cart, is passing. In real life, the occasion is marked by an easy-going trot or a casual stroll. But Affandi transforms the scene into an image of anxiety, of a haphazard trek, and of a disheveled passage. The brushworks are impetuous. No stable design is in place; the *Gestalt*

emerges as a process. It is a movement against purposiveness. The other work of Affandi (oil on canvas, dated 1962) is even more remote from Takdir's aesthetics.



■ Figure 7 – Affandi, “Telanjang”, oil on canvas, 1962.

The eroticism is unabashed. It is a gust of carnality, letting off rowdy brushworks in cadmium red against a backdrop of uncertain green. A work pervaded by sexual desire, it emits sparks of lewdness in undisciplined, febrile, strokes. It is a celebration of the flesh against the command of instrumental rationality. It brings out what Merleau-Ponty calls “[la] *nappe de sens brut*”, a layer of “raw” meaning construed by nothing.

In other words, the works have no penchant for “cosmic” order in the manner of *Poedjangga Baroe*'s poetry or the *Mooie Indie* panorama. Chairil Anwar, for one, articulates a modernist temper against the aesthetic of the pre-revolutionary 1930s, when he writes a short note describing the way an art work evolves: the beginning is “a chaotic stage” (*chaotische voorstadium*), he says, and the end a “cosmic stage” (*cosmische endstadium*) – which is a contingency. The irony, or perhaps the paradox, of modernity, like Takdir's, is that the end is in the beginning. Ultimately, what we have is an eulogy of pseudo-departure.

5

As you may notice, I am no fan of Takdir Alisyahbana's premise on literature. Obviously, I have a greater rapport with Latiff's works. This is, I admit, a biased position; like Latiff, I write poems and produce some drawings and paintings, so I am readily drawn by the parallelism between his verse and his visual virtuosity.

Not a wordy theoretician, he puts the basis of his aesthetic in a very short note published in *Catatan Latiff Mohidin*, typically using color as a metaphor:

Penyair berusaha sedaya upaya memberikan lapisan corak-warna (nuansa) dalam menghayati kehidupan harian, namun jalur fikiran kita, umumnya, ingin tetap tinggal dalam warna hitam-putih sahaja (“The poet tries forcefully to give nuances, layers of colors in daily life, but our line of thought generally prefers to stay in black-and-white”).

Poets use words as much as painters use colors, Sartre says in *What is Literature?*. One might think that the poet is composing a sentence, but actually he or she, like a painter, is “creating an object”. The poetic unity is nothing but a “phrase-object”. In Latiff's case, the object he creates, the austere lines of words he writes on his notebooks and the unvarnished colors he puts on his canvases have the simplicity and discreet elegance of Malay *pantuns*. And like good *pantuns*, it has parts that hint at enigmatic messages. But the message is the medium.

In other words, they are genuine images, not symbols. A symbol is a conceptual construct; Latiff's lines and shapes are phenomena – like *Dinggedicht*, “thing-poem” of Rilke, written under the influence of Rodin the sculptor and Cézanne the painter. Rilke's *Dinggedicht* invites us to have a painterly view of things from the outside. This implies a withdrawal of the subjective side of the encounter, to make the things autonomous. Latiff's *Pago-Pago* series, true to their quality as phenomena, assume no referential content. Their meaning is the outcome of, to use Rilke's words, “a half-unconscious finding” as opposed to the deliberate “search” of the intellectual mind. I think the canvases of *Pago-Pago* underline this.



■ Figure 8 - Latiff Mohidin, *Pago-Pago*.

They are pictures of beings without names, like the first batch of earthly creatures. Some, with their plant-like shapes, but with omnipresent eye-like dots and circles, suggest an alien organism with mythical genesis. Some have the grotesque look of Inca deities. Some remind me of the demons in the

Cambodian or Balinese shadow puppets. All insinuate the presence of different energies. In Latiff's imaginary beings, the energy is not a substance; it is a process. The process is both elegant and menacing. The *Pago-Pago* never suggest inertia; they are perpetual metamorphosis. They are simultaneously repetition and difference.

It is with such a vitality that Latiff's aesthetic transcends conceptual constraints. The works always a flux of de-framing. I believe that is what we need. They speak to us in a time when identity thinking frames the world, suppressing the "non-identity", as Adorno would say it. Poetry and the visual arts may not save us from it, but they, like Latiff's extensive contribution, can create a different space: an alternative. A story of framing and deframing.



■ Figure 9 - Latiff Mohidin, *Pago-Pago* series.