Cosmopolitanism, Nation, and the Urban–Rural Split in the Novels of Ayu Utami

Michael H. Bodden*
University of Victoria, Department of Pacific and Asian Studies
mbodden@uvic.ca

Abstract

Ayu Utami's novels Saman (1998) and Larung (2001) have attracted considerable attention, yet little of this attention has focused on their representation of cosmopolitanism. This article argues that the cosmopolitanism constructed in Utami's works exists in a world of unequal power relations and thus can only be more fully realized through democratic struggles, including struggles for more equal gender relations, in Indonesia and throughout the world. Yet the notion of a struggle for greater democracy within Indonesia is problematic in Saman and Larung precisely because of a spatio-temporal dialectic which the books represent—that between urban activists and marginalized rural populations, between secular modernity and a world seen as 'enchanted'. This divide is not simply the distance between cities and villages, but also one of relational space in which ideas and associations urban dwellers hold of villagers, as well as disparate ways of thinking, create gaps of understanding.

Keywords

Ayu Utami – novels – cosmopolitanism – democracy – relational space – gender – class

Ayu Utami's novels Saman (1998) and Larung (2001) are arguably the most influential works of Indonesian fiction since Pramoedya Ananta Toer's 1980s

---

* I would like to acknowledge the careful readings of earlier drafts of this article, along with helpful comments and suggestions from Keith Foulcher, L. Ayu Saraswati, and Michaela Campbell.

© MICHAEL H. BODDEN, 2016 | DOI: 10.1163/22134379-17204004
This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported (CC-BY-NC 3.0) License.
Buru tetralogy.\(^1\) They pioneered the way for other female fiction-writers to enter the market successfully with novels and short-story collections focused on urban life, pressing social issues, and relatively direct, unabashed discussions of female sexuality and descriptions of sex. It is this last feature that has been most prominently trumpeted in the Indonesian media, sometimes almost salaciously so, by promoters and detractors alike.

In what follows, I will look at an aspect of these novels that has not garnered much attention so far: how the novels foreground and shed light on contemporary representations of place and cosmopolitanism. In examining these themes, however, I do not intend to ignore representations of sexuality, but rather, will show the ways in which issues of gender and sexuality can be fruitfully tied to other pressing socio-political issues and, in turn, to cosmopolitanism. The cosmopolitanism within *Saman* and *Larung* is one that is dialectically tied to social struggles, including that for women’s equality, within the nation-state of Indonesia, and it is on this point that the novels’ spatio-temporal disjunctures highlight several highly problematic aspects of Indonesia’s movement for a just and equitable democracy, or, at the very least, the way that struggle is imagined and represented.

### Women’s Sexuality, Morality, Social Issues, and Cosmopolitan Space

Much of the public and academic discussion of Ayu’s novels has centred on the representations of four central, female characters and their relatively liberated attitudes towards sex and their own sexual identities.\(^2\) Alternatively, a number

---

1. They have certainly captured the imagination of many readers (*Saman* in particular has sold exceptionally well) and critics/scholars of Indonesian literature (they have garnered much more extensive comment and critical analysis by Indonesian and foreign commentators and scholars than most other Indonesian novels).

2. Some critics argue these characters represent to various degrees women taking control of their own sexuality, writing of the female body, or a liberation of representations of women from the confining New Order ideal of the woman as chiefly wife and mother, subservient to her husband, always acting only to nurture and protect her family; see Hatley 1999; Amiruddin 2003; and Budiman 2003. See also Julia Suryakusuma (2006), ‘When sex democratises: Indonesia women writers’, *Jakarta Post*, Outlook 2007 special edition, http://www.juliasuryakusuma.com/column.php?menu_id=1&year=2006&month=12&column_id=122 (accessed 5-12-2006). On the other hand, in 2003 senior poet Taufiq Ismail saw ‘young women writers’ as competing disgustingly with one another in terms of their writings’ sexual explicitness (Marching 2007a,
of critics have maintained that Ayu Utami’s novels’ discussions of social politics are equally central to their purpose. Yet none of them discusses the important place of representations of cosmopolitanism and spatial/temporal relations within these works, or effectively connects the presentation of sexuality to ideas of cosmopolitanism within the novels. A partial exception can be found in Laurie J. Sears’s thoughtful readings of Ayu’s first two novels in two articles published in 2007. Sears argued that in Saman and Larung, ‘[t]he space of the novel, where women can inhabit a Kantian subjectivity through their ability to travel, exists beyond the nation’. Sears goes on to state that the

3 Most notably Hatley 1999; Campbell 2005, 2007; and Marching 2007a. See also Anton Kurnia (2004), ‘Perempuan, seks, sastra’, Sinar Harapan, http://www.sinarharpan.co.id/hiburan/budaya/2004/0424/bud2.html (accessed 7-4-2006).
heroines’ shifting subjectivity interrupts the novel as national allegory, and that their movement between Indonesia and New York, and the novels’ beginning and ending in the ‘liminal space’ of the South China Sea, ‘disrupt the porous borders of the nation’ (Sears 2007a:61–2). While I believe Sears is correct to recognize the cosmopolitanism of the novels’ central characters as well as the fact that the borders of the nation do not contain their subjectivities, I will maintain that it is mistaken to suggest that ‘the space of the novel […] exists beyond the nation’. In fact, the novels’ cosmopolitanism exists in a dialectical tension with the very existence of the nation, as well as in the desire for its transformation. Therefore, I will argue, the novels suggest that for a truly universal cosmopolitanism to exist, national struggles for greater democracy, including different norms for imagining gender relations and sexuality, are essential. In order to make this argument, I first need to review briefly debates about the nature of cosmopolitanism.

Amanda Anderson (1998) argues that cosmopolitanism is often thought to consist of the following elements: a reflective distance from one’s own cultural affiliations; a broad understanding of other cultures and customs; and a belief in universal humanity. Craig Calhoun (2003) suggests that it also includes a tolerance for diversity and notions of oneself as a ‘citizen of the world’. A number of commentators have seen cosmopolitanism as a political antidote to both the virulent and extreme forms of nationalism, racism, or ethnocentrism arising globally in the last few decades, and to the equally rampant corporate capitalism of recent times, especially the toxic neo-liberalism of the post-cold-war era (Calhoun 2003:91). Such views suggest that cosmopol-

4 Sears may also be wrong to suggest that the women’s ‘Kantian subjectivity’ exists beyond the nation. Kantian cosmopolitan perspective itself is grounded firmly in the existence of sovereign states and individuals’ belonging to specific, territorially bounded states. Individual travel to states other than their own is seen as a universal right, but limited by the rights of each state to regulate that traffic, with emphasis placed on staying in the country of another only for short visits. Thus, Kant’s perspective is premised on individual subjects tied absolutely to particular states (Harvey 2009, 17–9, 117–9). Furthermore, as Pheng Cheah argues, though Kant’s ideas about cosmopolitanism were formulated before the rise of the idea of popular nationalism, there is a dialectical relationship between nation and cosmopolitanism since as ‘[a] prenationalist attempt to reform absolutist statism, it is not in the least an ideal of detachment as opposed to national attachment. It is, instead, a form of right based on existing attachments that bind us into a collectivity larger than the state; it can be claimed against states because individuals and states, co-existing in an external relationship of mutual influences, may be “regarded as citizens of a universal state of mankind”’ (Cheah 1998:24).

5 On the destructive social effects of neo-liberalism, see Harvey 2005 and Klein 2007.
itanism, as a philosophical ideal, must be tied to respect for others and relatively egalitarian, democratic practices.

Yet debates about cosmopolitanism have also included skepticism about our ability to imagine truly universal values that are not a product of an ethnocentric, potentially exclusionary, cultural system. Additionally, Calhoun (2003) has argued that theorists of cosmopolitanism tend to focus too exclusively on developing global political institutions in order to strengthen democracy in an era when nation-states are weakened by global capitalism, cross-border flows, and international media. Such theories, he continues, offer only a thin, traditionally liberal conception of social life, commitment, and belonging (Calhoun 2003:93–6). Calhoun feels that social commitments are only made compelling by the kind of social solidarity that forms of integration like shared culture, participation in the public sphere in order to influence the state, or categorical identities like nations, race, ethnicity, and class provide—all constructed from networks of interpersonal social relations not yet supplied by many transnational organizations (Calhoun 2003:98–100). This makes it difficult for people to commit passionately to cosmopolitanism.

A number of theorists argue that to turn solely to transnational politics, and to neglect the struggle for democratic rights within national and other local communities, would mean to abandon the institutions which have the most power to protect citizens from the ravages of global capitalism (Brennan 2003; Cheah 1998). Calhoun (2003:93–8) maintains that any cosmopolitanism which hopes to counter neo-liberalism and globalized capital must not only fight for global conceptions of rights, but must also recognize the importance of people taking part in struggles within their local communities and nations to develop and strengthen democracy.

David Harvey makes a similar argument, one that will be helpful in sorting out the concept of space-time in Ayu’s novels. Harvey argues that to contribute to a liberating practice of cosmopolitanism, one which overcomes the ‘world of prejudice’ (2009:118), geographical theory must hold three kinds of concepts of space-time in dialectical tension with one another. These three concepts are ‘absolute’ space (a concept that has long underpinned organized bourgeois society—clearly surveyed and bounded grids of private property and

---

6 Anderson and Harvey have shown how recent theorists of cosmopolitanism have grappled with a central problem: how to reconcile cosmopolitanism’s conflicting notions of respecting difference—other cultures—and striving to define a universal ethics held by all (Anderson 1998; Harvey 2009). For Judith Butler and others, the answer is continually to set different conceptions of universality and rights in dialogue so as to keep us aware of cultural difference and looking for ways to bridge these gaps (Anderson 1998:280–2).
individualized identities mapped onto a clear set of coordinates within each nation-state construct); ‘relative’ space (where space and time are intertwined in processes of motion and circulation, becoming relative to means of transportation and communication which allow money, goods, and people from different locations to circulate to particular places in the same amount of time); and ‘relational’ space (that space in which multiple processes—power relations, memories, associations, desires—help construct the very space itself). Harvey holds that we must be willing to look beyond existing constructs of the absolute space of the nation-state and fixed, clearly demarcated individual identities to new, relative and relational ways of understanding space and time that see new possible identities across borders and subject to rapid change. In his view, we must prioritize events and processes over the purportedly fixed nature of identities and things. Nonetheless, for Harvey, any truly liberating theory of cosmopolitanism and associated social practice must still connect new relational forms of thinking with the actual, material ways in which identities and practices are constructed and lived in particular, absolute spaces (Harvey 2009:133–65, 280–2). It is this recognition of the dependence between cosmopolitan visions and local struggles for democracy by theorists such as Calhoun and Harvey that I find the most fruitful for analysing the cultural politics of Ayu Utami’s important novels.

Synopsis and Thematic and Spatio-Temporal Structuring of the Novel

_Saman_ opens with the meeting of a female photographer, Laila, with an oil platform worker, Sihar, whose colleague has been killed as a result of the arrogance of the oil rig manager, Rosano. Laila helps put an angry, vengeful Sihar in touch with a priest/teacher-turned-social-activist now working under an assumed name, Saman. The novel then recounts parts of Saman’s past—his peculiar family background and involvement with a community of rubber-tapping farmers, whose land is forcibly expropriated by a palm-oil plantation. Through Laila, the novel also leads to narratives of the lives and desires of Laila and her three friends, Cok, Shakuntala, and Yasmin. Eventually, Saman is forced to flee Indonesia in order to avoid arrest, and the four women meet him in New York, where he has taken a job working for Human Rights Watch. In _Larung_, we are introduced to Larung, who is a pro-democracy activist but also psychotic. Larung imagines that his aged and infirm grandmother wants him to euthanize her. He searches for a way to kill her, given that, as he imagines, she possesses a powerful magic that keeps her alive. After continuing
the narrative of Laila and her friends’ experiences in New York, along with supplying more background information about their formative years, the novel concludes with the disastrous return of Saman to Indonesia in order to help three pro-democracy activists escape from the country. In the end, they are caught by the Indonesian authorities and Larung, Saman, and Saman’s friend, Anson, are killed.

Looking at Ayu’s novels with a more detailed eye, it is possible to see they are structured in at least two ways. First, her novels’ sections are almost always prefaced by indications of the space and/or time in which the action is occurring. This allows us to examine the relationships between time and space in ways that make Harvey’s three concepts extremely useful. For instance, it sets up a series of relationships between the absolute space of specific locations (nations, cities, villages), the relative spaces enabled by air travel and globalized circulation of media products and businesses, and the relational spaces in which processes of power and representation across time form relations between groups and individuals. It is the relationships between these three kinds of spaces in the novel which suggest that a liberating cosmopolitanism is tied dialectically to democratic struggles in individual countries, and that the democratic struggle in Indonesia, as represented in Ayu’s two novels, is troubled by deep divides linked to both absolute and relational space.

The temporal structure of the text is especially complicated: any experience of linear time clearly dividing past from present (or future) is deconstructed in the novel as several (mostly female) characters remember their experiences in Indonesia while sojourning in New York, blurring both geographic and temporal boundaries and fusing the two distinct locales and times into a pattern of interlocked meanings. To add to the temporal confusion, the much more extensive and detailed narratives of the male characters’ (Saman and Larung) pasts occur in Indonesia and are interspersed with ‘present’ segments, hopping back and forth in time and locale. Thus the narrative of the novels skips from one character to another as well as jumping temporally, from 1996 (New York) to 1993 to the 1960s to 1984 to 1990 to 1975 and even 1632 (all in Indonesia) to 1994 (New York), then 1985 (Indonesia), back to 1996 (New York), 1993 (Indonesia), 1996 (New York), and finally 1996 (Indonesia). In this way, memory and perceived associations across time and space become powerful aspects of the novels, suggesting the power of the ‘immaterial but objective’ (Harvey 2009:138–50) reality of relational space.

The second structuring device consists of apparent sets of binary juxtapositions, the most geographically oriented of which—those of New York versus Jakarta/Indonesia, cosmopolitanism versus nation, world economic powers versus formerly colonized developing countries, and Indonesian cities versus...
villages—seem tied to notions of absolute space (space that is fixed, immovable, and has a clear boundary). Yet other apparent binaries—past versus present, and male versus female, rationality versus the supernatural and magic—which may be linked more to relational concepts of space and time become intertwined with the representation of geographical space and, in so doing, complicate the binary oppositions, blurring and even partially deconstructing them.

For example, large sections of *Saman* and *Larung* are set in New York City and seem aimed at presenting Indonesians as vital participants in a post-colonial global culture. The narrative voices and perspectives of the four main female protagonists dominate these sections, though Saman, the ex-catholic priest, is also a significant narrator of the New York experience. Other sections of the books take place in the specifically Indonesian locales of South Sumatra, East Java/Bali, and Bintan. In these chapters, specifically Indonesian concerns and discourses come to the fore, including issues of gender role constraints and questions of a masculinized culture of violence which denigrates women, the fate of impoverished villagers in remote regions, student movements for social change, magic, spirit beliefs, and recent Indonesian history. The narrative voices and perspectives are mixed here between male and female, with male perspectives more sustained and prevalent. As can be seen from this summary description, male and female perspectives are presented in both locations. Still, the general pattern of dominants which are attached to each geographic location—New York: female, love and sex, cosmopolitan life; and Indonesia: male, politics and magic (madness), local concerns—indicates that the books work by suggesting, and also blurring, binary oppositions. This in itself foregrounds a set of meanings for Ayu's work—the deconstruction of prevalent binary ways of imaging gender roles, politics, and even, as I will show in more detail below, geographical notions of absolute space.

**New York as Space of the Cosmopolitan in *Saman* and *Larung***

While there is no denying that issues of female sexuality and sexual desire occupy an important place in Ayu's novels, here I will demonstrate that cosmopolitanism is an equally significant dimension of these novels. This cosmopolitan dimension can be fruitfully connected to discussions of female sexuality and gender roles to show how these works contain a broader, richer universe of meaning and engagement with Indonesian and global life than most critics to date have been able to reveal.
A cosmopolitan openness to other cultures in Saman and Larung begins with the very structure of the novels, for the chapters in New York tend to be more stylistically and thematically ‘realist’ than those in Indonesia (though it is also in New York where Shakuntala relates her fantasies of falling in love with ogres, and meeting a seventeenth-century European explorer of Southeast Asia—more negating of strict binaries!). On one level, the need for facticity in the ‘realist’ sections of Ayu’s novels almost requires the deployment of superfluous details that evoke the material reality of New York. Thus, Laila, Shakuntala, and Saman, as well as, later, Yasmin and Cok, frequently describe places they visit and travels they make while in New York.\(^7\) But it is with the characterization of the four leading female characters that the novels’ true cosmopolitan orientation becomes clear. The four female protagonists all speak and read English, and are widely versed in foreign high and popular/consumer culture—they compare things they see to paintings by Klee or Seurat, they discuss jazz and the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Deleuze, they drink Starbucks coffee and are conversant with American television programming.\(^8\) Indeed, the

---

\(^7\) Thus, we can find details of the geography of New York City in both novels: we know that Laila’s lover, Sihar, is staying at the Days Inn on 57th Street West (Saman:118; Larung:97) and that Saman attends a seminar at Columbia University (Saman:278). We also accompany Saman on his journey from JFK Airport to the Office of Human Rights Watch after he first arrives in New York (Saman:65–7). Shakuntala visits the offices of the Asian Cultural Council (which has funded her stay in New York), from which she can see the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, Rockefeller Center, and the skating rink just in front of it (Saman:141). We are told that Saman buys a cassette of Eastern European music in Grand Central Station (Larung:177), and Shakuntala describes the environs of her flat in the Chelsea neighbourhood with its used-cassette and cd stores, as well as Lincoln Center, Broadway, and Off Broadway (Saman:142–3). Shakuntala invites Laila, Cok, and Yasmin to drink at the Sake House, walk along St. Mark’s, eat at Figaro’s, and listen to jazz at a club near the Blue Note (Larung:116–7). Together with Saman and Sihar, the friends watch Shakuntala’s performance at the BAM (Larung:125). And, of course, Saman opens with Laila waiting in vain for a rendezvous with Sihar in Central Park (Saman:3, 28–30, 37–9).

\(^8\) More facticity is derived from these references to Western (and, in one or two instances, Japanese) culture, both popular and high, which are to be found in the New York sections. Shakuntala drinks Starbucks coffee and compares people in the metro to Swatch watches (Saman:140); she and Laila entertain themselves at her apartment by watching the Rosie O’Donnell show and playing with a Tickle-Me-Elmo puppet while talking about Jim Henson and imitating Kermit the Frog (Saman:117, 122–3). Shakuntala finds the theatre scene of New York vibrant and varied, enumerating several plays then on Broadway (Saman:143–4), and she appreciates the art-deco style of the Chrysler Building (Saman:141). They enjoy the city’s multicultural food, drink, and music offerings (Larung:116–117), and discuss Chet Baker and Keith Jarrett (Larung:119). This cosmopolitan outlook, this desire to explore and embrace
four friends revel in the multicultural food and drink available in New York. These women, as well as the activist-refugee Saman, are clearly cultural cosmopolitans.

Yet much of the high culture as well as some of the popular culture the characters discuss is available to Indonesians in major urban centres in Indonesia. After all, an intellectual tradition of embracing world culture, of seeing Indonesia as an equal on the world stage, has long roots in Indonesia: a tendency towards cosmopolitanism is nothing new to a nation where formerly disparate kingdoms accepted first Indic, then Middle Eastern cultures and religions, and maritime ports often included quarters for various foreign traders (Reid 1993:73–90, 114–23). Furthermore, participants in Indonesian proto-national and national culture have for decades, since the beginning of the twentieth century and continuing through the 1930s era of Pujangga Baru and more recent decades, read widely in world literature and culture and seen themselves as participants in a global cultural realm. With her two novels, Ayu Utami brings her own creative vision into this tradition. Certainly, her characters exemplify it: their English skills did not develop overnight upon reaching New York, nor did their general knowledge of Western culture. They refer to American and Japanese fast-food restaurants in Jakarta (Saman:124), and mention in passing characters from Latin American telenovelas so popular in Indonesian daytime TV (Larung:93). Thus, the female protagonists of Ayu’s novels did not need to go to New York to absorb these elements of international culture. What then, aside from the idea of going to one of the major sources of contemporary global culture to see it first-hand for oneself, is the wider cosmopolitan allure of New York as locale? To understand this, we must now turn to the troubling intersection of local and global politics, including the politics of gender ideology and normative roles.

Aspects of foreign cultures, can be seen in the already wide set of cultural references the main female characters display, reflecting the breadth of their education and interests even before they travel to New York. They all read English (Larung:135), as well as being able to use smatterings of English in their daily conversations. They are familiar with Western painting and dance forms, fairy tales, and the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Deleuze. However, they are also critical of aspects of foreign culture, for example the prevalence of the image of Barbie and cosmetics (Larung:118).
The Cosmopolitan Centre as Refuge from the National-Local: Site of Alternatives, Ally in Local Struggles

In Ayu’s novels, at least three of the major characters feel the need to go to New York, a cosmopolitan centre, in order to escape various constraints at home. Laila travels to New York to have a rendezvous with her married lover, Sihar. She hopes that, being outside Indonesia and in far-away America where different social codes of behaviour prevail, she will dare to shed her fears of losing her virginity and have sexual intercourse with him (Saman:2–3; 28–30; Larung:120).

Shakuntala also desires to escape from constraints at home, especially the figures of her father and older sibling, who condemn her sexual behaviour and consider her a ‘whore’ because she does not conform to normative patterns of gendered and sexual activity for a woman (Saman:115). Saman (Wisanggeni) must travel to New York to take up work with an international human right’s organization when he is forced to flee Indonesia in the wake of the Medan riots of April 1994 (Saman:163–82). In a way, all three are refugees, running from Indonesia for one reason or another. And while the reasons that Laila and Shakuntala need to seek refuge in New York seem very different from that of Saman, a closer examination will show that there is a clear connection between the causes of their respective exoduses.

If many critics have written of the importance of Ayu’s novels’ representations of women who are not afraid to discuss their sexual desires or to act on them as a form of liberation for Indonesian women, they do so with good reason. The texts of Saman and Larung critically present an image of Indonesian females subjected to a strict regime of control and indoctrination so as to fit a passive, sexually demure, and vulnerable norm of woman, one needing protection and always available as an object of aggression in male-dominated political struggles.

Laila and Shakuntala describe in most detail the ways in which their families physically torture them ‘for their own good’ in order to make them conform to more normative behaviour, or to avoid arousing male advances. Laila’s mother tries to suppress and hide the growth of Laila’s breasts by rolling a bottle over them, causing Laila great pain (Larung:104–5). Shakuntala is tied to a bed and instructed on proper gender behaviour by her father, who tells her that women must not approach men, and that men support and protect women in

---

9 Yasmin goes to New York ostensibly to support her friends Laila and Shakuntala, but also to meet Saman, who has become her secret lover (Saman:145–6; Larung:78, 90, 99–100), while Cok goes mainly to support her friends and to enjoy a vacation (Saman:145–6; Larung:78, 90, 99–100).
marriage, where alone a woman should surrender her virginity to her husband. Thus, in Shakuntala’s tale, physical punishment is tied to moral indoctrination, an indoctrination about sexual and gender roles which is reinforced by both Islam and Christianity, as Saman recounts (Saman:191). Shakuntala’s mother also emphasizes the importance of virginity for normative womanhood by comparing women to porcelain china: if their virginity is lost, they are like cracked porcelain that will be thrown away (Saman:120–1, 124–5). Nevertheless, because she falls in love with a raksasa,10 Shakuntala’s father sends her to school in a different city (Saman:119–21). Even Cok, who later becomes the most openly sexually adventurous of the four, as a younger woman suffers the punishment of being sent away to Bali after her parents find condoms in her purse (Saman:151).

This regimen is not successful in taming Shakuntala’s desire, though the social ideology it represents even forces the strong, competent Yasmin to give up her own subject-hood and think of herself as the sexual object of men (Larung:158). However, the social regime of control and indoctrination has the deepest effect on Laila, who of the four friends has most strongly internalized the normative values which her mother and family prescribed. Laila acts in many ways as the typically normative woman. Though a self-supporting photographer and, though odd in that she is still unmarried at age thirty, she is still a virgin, and she feels great guilt about the unconsummated affair which she has had with the married Sihar (see for example Saman:4, 26; and Larung:102). She is attracted to certain men for stereotypical reasons—because they are jantan (masculine, manly, but also courageous, bold), even satria (noble, aristocratic warrior) (Larung:114, 130). This is already evident in her first meeting with Sihar. She begins to notice him because of his honesty and seeming lack of interest in women, but also because of his hard, muscular body,11 the traces of grey in his hair, the smell of tobacco on his breath, and the way in which he stands up to Rosano, the impatient, reckless, and arrogant manager of the oil rig on which he is contracted to work (Saman:10, 12, 22, 25). Similarly, as might a nurturing, understanding, normative woman, Laila appears willing to believe the best about Sihar, and even make excuses for him, to the point of naiveté (Saman:121, 131–2, 145; Larung:101–2).

---

10 Raksasa literally means ‘ogre/demon’, but in these novels Shakuntala seems to use the word to signify both ogres and foreigners—or possibly, even people her father does not want her to associate with—see especially Saman 119–38.

11 After their first introduction, the text even offers a brief passage in which Laila, in first-person voice, describes how she watched Sihar take off his singlet and wipe the sweat from his upper body (Saman:12).
The men in Laila’s life also show another aspect of this complex of gender roles and relations. When organizing a plan to make sure Rosano is held accountable for the death of Sihar’s colleague, Hasyim, Saman and Sihar exclude Laila from some of their discussions simply by saying that it is ‘urusan laki-laki’ (men’s business—Saman:33), an act that is repeated again in similar meetings (Larung:115) or when Saman talks with Anson (Larung:109). Similarly, Saman excludes Yasmin from their extra-legal manoeuvrings to make sure that Rosano pays for his deed (Larung:115). This need to protect women from the rougher, dirty forms of politics is not as innocent as it first might appear.

The other side of the coin of the ideology of gender which mandates that men must ‘protect’ women is the fact that this makes women into potentially vulnerable targets for one’s opponents. Such an assumption was already foreshadowed in Laila’s mother’s idea that if Laila’s breasts remained small, she would not tempt men to try to take advantage of her (Larung:104–5). This principle carries over into the realm of politico-economic struggle as well. Thugs working for the company that is harassing the villagers of Sei Kumbang in order to take control of their land for a palm oil plantation, twice rape women of the village as a form of intimidation: Upi (Saman:86–7) and Anson’s wife (Saman:97–8). When Laila is worried that Sihar has not kept their rendezvous in Central Park because he may have been murdered, Shakuntala recalls the well-known murder of the worker-activist Marsinah, who was brutally raped and murdered (Saman:117). That gender roles are tied to politics in these novels is additionally confirmed by the fact that Saman’s torturers strip him naked and dress him in women’s underwear in order to mock him—to feminize him, to cast him as deprived of that manliness with which he might clothe himself and maintain his pride (Saman:102).

Thus, the reasons why Shakuntala, Laila, and Saman must escape to New York find a common thread. The politics of violence described above are tightly entwined with notions of gender roles. Furthermore, the novels suggest that it will be difficult to change these facets of Indonesian life. Saman and Sihar see Indonesia as a place where money and power rule, where justice is for sale and, thus, out of the reach of ordinary people. For example, Rosano, the arrogant, young oil-rig supervisor is the son of a highly placed government official. The joint venture between an Indonesian company and a Canadian-based multinational corporation, Texcoil, has financed Rosano’s education in return for oil concession contracts in Indonesia (Saman:8, 13). Sihar doubts that he could be brought to justice for the deaths of Hasyim and two others, telling Laila that Texcoil has enough money to guarantee the silence of the families of the deceased (Saman:21). Saman writes to Laila about the fact that the world is full of bad people who are never punished, many of whom
are protected from the law and the authorities (Saman:33). Laila, too, believes that in Indonesia the powerful can easily seek revenge on those who have hurt them, and she imagines how many killings of all sorts can happen in Indonesia in a week, thereby obscuring one more such incident (Saman:38). The destruction of Sei Kumbang by security forces working with a big business interested in converting the land to palm oil production presents one more example of the ways in which the novels depict the coercion available to those with power and money (Saman:87–114). The narratives of the Sabtu Kelabu attack on the PDI headquarters in downtown Jakarta in July 1996, sent by Yasmin to Saman, work to suggest that such fictional events are not simply the product of Ayu Utami’s imagination, but are indeed close to the truth of the actual history of New Order Indonesia (Larung:173–6, 182–4). Finally, the murder of Larung, Saman, and Anson at the end of Larung, further represents the arbitrary use of violence meted out by the system, this time, in the person of a Kopassus (Komando Pasukan Khusus, Indonesian Special Forces) intelligence operative who has allowed himself to be provoked by Larung’s needling (Larung:256–9).12

In contrast to some theorists of cosmopolitanism (Brennan 2003; Cheah 1998), who have argued that the nation-state is the most important line of defence against global, neo-liberal capitalism, Saman and Larung depict a nation-state that offers little protection either from global corporations, or from domestic businessmen and authorities who possess money and power. Thus, the arbitrary violence exercised by companies, the security apparatus, and powerful individuals in Indonesia, along with the restrictive gender ideologies with which such violence is intertwined, become powerful factors pushing Laila, Shakuntala, and Saman to seek varying periods of refuge in New York.

Conversely, the cosmopolitan city offers its own pull factors, its own attractions. Laila sees it as a place of freedom akin to a state of nature in which there is no sin (Saman:1–3, 29–30; Larung:120, 150). It is also a place where there is none of the social surveillance of which she was so keenly aware in Indonesia.13

---

12 See also Saman’s observations on what has happened to the Lubukrantau area since it has come under the control of the palm oil company (Saman:158–9), and his general reflection on power and justice in Indonesia (Saman:67).

13 This surveillance also includes harassment and extortion by local security guards and juvenile delinquents who catch couples in intimate situations in automobiles (Larung:120). This offers yet another connection between gender, sex, and the political system.
Because I'm waiting here for Sihar. Here, unbeknownst to anyone apart from the tramp. Away from any parents, away from any wife. Away from those moral judges or the police. Here people, particularly tourists, can do as the birds do: mate when they feel the desire. No regrets afterwards. No sin.14

_Saman_, translation Pamela Allen 2005:32

Laila’s longing to find a release for her sexual desire is ultimately frustrated since Sihar comes to New York with his wife (Saman:118; Larung:96–7), yet in a sense her trip there marks a potential new beginning. After her failed rendezvous with Sihar, Laila returns to Shakuntala’s apartment, rising head-first from the subway, with a watching Shakuntala imagining her emergence as like that of a baby emerging from the womb (Saman:116). Thereafter, Laila indeed experiences a symbolic rebirth when Shakuntala seduces her, introducing her to the physical pleasure which sex can bring. This is in itself a form of liberation for the sexually inhibited Laila, who has so long guarded her virginity, something that became a major impediment to continuing her affair with Sihar (Saman:3–6; Larung:100–1).

Shakuntala finds in New York a place where she is freer to express the multiple gendered identities she contains within her, especially through her dance, freer to pursue her dance and the continual process of transformation and becoming which it signifies (Saman:115–6, 125–6; Larung:333–5, 140). This is partially because New York is far from the inhibitive presence of her father and older sibling and offers an atmosphere of relatively more relaxed gender codes and sexual morality, but it is also because the thriving, dynamic art scene in New York offers a greater variety of venues in which to perform, as well as a larger audience with an appreciation of different kinds of performance (Saman:137, 138, 143–4, 147–9). New York is also the place of the strange, fascinating ‘other’ for her, a place she can look for the forbidden ‘ogres’ (raksasa) with whom Indonesia’s history has long become entwined. Though in the end it does not turn out to be the home of the stereotypical raksasa (ogre, demon) of the Javanese wayang tales, New York is full of many different sizes and shapes of people and, as such, signifies both a dispelling of ‘east-west’ stereotypes (Saman:120, 134–8, 140–1) and a place where Shakuntala’s love for transformation, for difference, for the ganjil (the ‘odd’ or extraordinary) (Larung:140,

---

14 The Indonesian (Saman:2–3) reads: ‘Sebab saya sedang menunggu Sihar di tempat ini. Di tempat yang tak seorang pun tahu, kecuali gembel itu. Tak ada orang tua, tak ada istri. Tak ada hakim susila atau polisi. Orang-orang, apalagi turis, boleh menjadi seperti unggas: kawin begitu mengenal birahi. Setelah itu, tak ada yang perlu ditangisi. Tak ada dosa.’
143), can flower most fully. The importance of the *ganjil* for Shakuntala is precisely in its ability to make that which is packed tight dissolve and flow freely (Larung:43). In this sense, Shakuntala is the most cosmopolitan-minded of all the characters.

Saman must flee Indonesia or face incarceration and, likely, more torture, following the Medan incident of 1994. Opportunely, he is able to fill a position organizing an information network involving Southeast Asia for Human Rights Watch (*Saman*:175). Going to New York and working for Human Rights Watch means that Saman will have more ready access to the international network of NGOs and human rights agencies which may be able to assist in development and pro-democracy efforts in Indonesia (*Saman*:170). Thus, there is a potential he can find more allies for a cosmopolitan struggle for democratization. And indeed, one of the projects he helps facilitate by finding international donors is setting up an underground press for distributing pro-democracy information (*Larung*:170–2). He is also stimulated by intellectual discussions and seminars about Indonesia (*Saman*:179–81).

**Imperfections in the Cosmopolis and Alienation: The Struggle for Democracy at Home**

Yet the cosmopolitan location of New York is not perfect. Laila does not manage to consummate her affair with Sihar in New York (*Larung*:28–32, 150–3). Shakuntala wonders if the artistic grant she has received is not another way for Westerners to compensate for their guilt at having exploited the developing nations for decades or centuries (*Saman*:141–2). Saman notices the arrogance (and possible racism) of US immigration practices when arriving in LA (*Saman*:166) and grows angry with one international NGO which refuses to fund the underground-press project after using an Indonesian journalist and Saman (as translator) to help raise money for their own organization (*Larung*:171–2). In these last two examples we get a sense of the uneven relations of power in global culture and politics, with the United States and the ‘West’ holding stronger positions that allow them a sense of cultural superiority and greater ability to dictate global conditions. And, in fact, early on in *Saman*, as noted above, we find out that the company for which Rosano works and to which Sihar’s services are contracted is a joint venture between an Indonesian company and a Canadian, multinational corporation (*Saman*:8). Ayu’s cosmopolitan locale is hardly a utopia, though it does offer several of her characters refuge and alternatives from what they have known in their home country. This is in keeping with her novels’ critical view of cosmopolitanism—it is as though
Ayu's characters appreciate the West, but do, as Neil Lazarus, citing Adorno, puts it, 'hate tradition properly'. That is, they understand and appreciate what Western culture has to offer, such as notions of democracy and egalitarianism, but are prepared to analyse it critically, turning its own interior logic and promises against it to demonstrate that it is incapable, under the present system, of fulfilling those pledges (Lazarus 1999:7). Equally important, this critical gaze turned on the cosmopolitan centre confirms the overall pattern of blurring and dissolving binaries—as typified in Shakuntala's encounter with the seventeenth-century 'ogre', which demonstrates the way in which both Indonesia and the West have stereotyped one another (Saman:134–7). In fact, the operations of the Canadian multinational corporation at the very beginning of the first novel alert us to the fact that not only are the more cosmopolitan nations not perfect, but in fact, their power rests in part upon the ability of their corporations and governments to exploit the undemocratic relations in developing countries for their own gain. This is also made clear when the human rights group exploits the Indonesian activists to raise funds for its own efforts, while refusing to fund Saman and Yasmin's information network (Larung:171–2).

Thus, it is with precisely this sense of a global power imbalance, and the interplay between international NGO support and Indonesian pro-democracy efforts, that Ayu's books return our gaze to the 'national'—to Indonesia—as absolutely necessary to the true development of a democratic, globally extensive cosmopolitanism, in which relations of power between nations are no longer so lopsided, much as Calhoun's or Harvey's theories would assert. Ayu's novels are clearly deeply engaged with Indonesian society, culture, and politics—they are saturated with references to contemporary Indonesian figures and events. As long as he is in New York, Saman, the reluctant exile,

---

15 See Marching 2007a:44–6 for an analysis of this encounter using post-colonial theory.
16 Clark (2004:71–7) has pointed out the importance of references to Javanese wayang in Saman. The sections on Saman's childhood in Perabumulih with his mother, aspects of his life in Sei Kumbang, and Larung's relationship to his grandmother are similarly rife with ideas and stories reflecting Javanese beliefs about spirits, spiritual power, and magic (Saman:44–57, 61–5, 84–6, 97, 108–9; Larung:1–74). Additional cultural references include a Kompas newspaper article in which Indonesian bureaucrats discuss the danger of cultural influence from Western films, consumer products, and tourists (Saman:136); Pramoedya's banned books (Saman:167); and the poetry of Wiji Thukul (Larung:221). The narratives of the two novels also record New Order pressures for the ethnic Chinese to assimilate and anti-Chinese prejudice (Saman:38, 94–5, 174), narrate part of the Medan incident of April 1994 (Saman:68–9, 174), make note of the banning of Tempo, Editor,
also experiences a profound sense of alienation and longing for the forests and islands of Sumatra. He feels he could do more if he were still in Indonesia, sorely misses his friends in the activist network, and feels guilty to be enjoying his freedom in the relative comfort and prosperity of New York. When he is finally able to return in order to help the three Solidarlit activists escape, in an emotional act of patriotism, he kisses the beach when he first arrives in Anson’s boat on a remote Indonesian island (Saman:168, 170, 178; Larung:165, 198–9). The theme of longing for Indonesia, for the forests and villages where he is most comfortable, but also for a (mostly) male realm of social and political action, becomes a significant element in Saman’s narrative.

Though the novels offer evidence that political conditions in Indonesia will be very difficult to change, they nonetheless also suggest there is still much that can be done in Indonesia. Indonesian women activists apply a feminist critique to Indonesia and labour activists address issues of workers’ conditions at the seminar Saman witnesses in New York (Saman:179–81). This is a sign of ferment that is occurring in Indonesia as can be seen from the mention of Muchtar Pakpahan and the Medan incident, in which industrial workers were central, but also in the questions the four women raise, as Barbara Hatley has catalogued, about virginity, about the relative merits of marriage and prostitution, about overbearing parental control of female children (Hatley 1999:455; Saman:120–1, 149), and about men’s perceptions that they must be responsible for women’s virginity (Larung:101).

In keeping with Ayu’s deconstruction of binaries, differences among the four women also suggest that the oppressive gender training and control is not complete, that in some cases Indonesian women can already resist. In contrast to Laila and Shakuntala, Yasmin and Cok are able to live more successfully in Indonesia. Certainly, Yasmin can only reveal a part of herself and needs to hide her sexual fantasies (Larung:155–62), but she is able to cope in Indonesia much more comfortably than Laila or Shakuntala. Cok, though she still voices resentment at what she perceives to be the unfairness of a society that criticizes women for doing things men do without censure (Larung:83), has been

and DeTik (Larung:95), the 1996 Sabtu Kelabu raid on Megawati Sukarnoputri’s PDI headquarters in Jakarta (Larung:173–6), and the hunt for the PRD activists (Larung:82–4, 235). Additional political references include mention of political figures such as Muchtar Pakpahan (Saman:170), Adnan Buyung Nasution, and Sri Bintang Pamungkas (Saman:178), to the February 1989 incidents in Lampung (Saman:107), the murder of Marsinah and the cover-up in the court case which followed (Saman:167), mention of the underground Internet media, Star, Apakabar, and Berita dari Pijar (Larung:167), and of the imprisonment of PRD labour activist Dita Sari (Larung:84–5).
able to liberate herself from her family’s moral strictures, living a life full of sexual affairs while successfully managing a hotel business. Even Shakuntala has built the inner resources to resist while in Indonesia, though she revels in the dynamism and freedom of New York.

Yasmin is also an interesting figure for her consistent involvement in the pro-democracy movement as a lawyer (Saman:24, 171–3; Larung:95, 169–72) once again blurring the binary of the dominant themes in the novels where politics is ‘urusan laki-laki’. Her narrative of involvement, along with those of Larung, Wisanggeni/Saman, and even the three Solidarlit activists, offer representations of the important pro-democracy work in which many Indonesians were engaged within their country prior to 1998, though usually forced to be cautious and to move at a painfully deliberate pace. In Saman’s remarks to Yasmin, which form part of their correspondence, we see something of the idea that if the cosmopolitan spaces are not utopia, neither is Indonesia a completely repressive dystopia (Saman:167). In that passage, Saman supplies a much-needed corrective to all those who tended to see the Indonesian New Order system as relentlessly in control, quashing all dissent or moves to organize various segments of the population to demand and defend their lives and rights. A possible implication of this bleak view of Indonesia is the erroneous idea that Indonesians themselves are unable to change their situation, and therefore need help from benefactors in more ‘enlightened’, or at least, more liberal and cosmopolitan systems. Saman’s comment, along with the other textual evidence noted above, serves as a warning to cosmopolitan readers of Saman and Larung not to make such a mistake.

In the end, the novels suggest an order in which the absolute space of the nation, while vitally important to projects of democracy and a more egalitarian form of cosmopolitanism, indeed has become less than absolute. As Sears has argued, its borders have become porous. While the novels signify the continued importance of ‘absolute space’, at the same time they also demonstrate the encroachment upon its control and authority by relative space as represented both in the ability of most of the main characters to travel to New York and to gain access to globalized media- and finance-scapes that bring foreign cultures and businesses to Jakarta. Similarly, relational space is represented in the power relations prevailing between the developed countries and countries like Indonesia, as well as in the associations characters like Shakuntala and Saman have constructed based upon those relations.
The Distance between City and Village

Yet Ayu’s novels are caught on a dilemma raised by their representation of the pro-democracy movement as something that holds at least a modest amount of hope for helping to establish a broader and deeper grass-roots democracy in Indonesia, and, ultimately, a more just cosmopolitan global order. Laurie Sears has argued that the male characters in these two novels are incapable of successfully organizing change in Indonesia because the traumas of their past mark them as fatally bound to, and flawed by, Indonesia’s post-colonial history and the New Order regime which that history eventually produced (Sears 2007b:36–8). Sears goes on to assert that for the women protagonists

[i]n their fluid and overlapping subjectivity, represented in the novels by the overlapping and intertwined voices and movements, there is the promise of a future feminist agency and power that would not be activist in a masculine sense, but would seek to find collective rather than individualistic ways to answer the problems of the post-colonial nation.

Further, Sears notes that the novels hint that the way of life of the villages, and the idea of supernatural or magic power sometimes bound up with that way of life, may be a thing of the past in Indonesia and that, if it cannot be assimilated, may even be that which helps shackle and blunt the potential of contemporary social activism (Sears 2007b:36–7). Sears’ reading may be partly correct, but I would like to reframe the binary of urban activism and village life, along with the issue of women’s agency, in the hope of understanding more deeply the dialectic relationships entangling all three terms. For it seems to me that Sears’ analysis misses something.

That something is the gap between the novels’ main ‘activist’ characters and ordinary, less educated, non-middle-class, non-elite Indonesians. This divide is a problematic one whose centrality to the novel is signaled by the very ties of the male characters, Saman and Larung, to the older women in their families, as well as to ordinary Indonesians and villagers. The problematic nature of this relationship is embedded in the very thematics and spatio-temporal structure of the two novels. The presence of this problematic nature is signaled by a series of disjunctures.

The first disjuncture is at the thematic level, represented in several key passages in the books. Here, the novels’ middle-class activists may cohabit the same absolute space as ordinary Indonesians when they work with them in the villages or urban settings, but nonetheless are worlds apart in terms of the construction of relational space—the space of power relations and narra-
tives/perceptions about reality. Despite his long, intensive work with the villagers of Lubukrantau, Saman realizes at several key points in the novel that he is not, nor can he ever be, ‘one of them’. Like many middle-class Indonesians, Wisanggeni/Saman is deeply concerned with the fate and suffering of the nation’s many poor and marginalized. While meeting Father Westenberg regarding his proposal that he be allowed to work in Lubukrantau as part of his pastoral duties, Wis admits he couldn’t sleep after first visiting the village. As a priest, he feels that simply praying is not enough with regards to the situation of such villagers, and he feels guilty sleeping in comfortable quarters and enjoying the bountiful food prepared by the parishioners (Saman:81). After receiving permission to divide his time between Lubukrantau and Perabumulih, Wis spends extensive time with the villagers and even convinces them to undertake a programme to improve their rubber farming and raise their standard of living. When a crisis arises because of pressure and intimidation from a large company wishing to take control of their land, Wis realizes, in the midst of the villagers’ debates, that there are still many things that he does not know about them, and that he does not run the same risks or stand to suffer the same consequences of their actions as the villagers (Saman:94–6, 99). He again experiences those feelings when Anson stops to help pirates rob a passing ship while smuggling him into Indonesia to assist in the Solidalit activists’ escape (Larung:112). He realizes the differences of opportunity that have molded each of them, offering Anson fewer choices in life, though he still cannot accept the danger in which Anson put his mission (Larung:198). We witness an even greater disjuncture between the Solidalit activists and ordinary Indonesians in Wayan Togog’s failure to understand the motivations of the many relatives working for low pay in his father’s clinic. Consequently, he is unable to get them to demand higher wages (Larung:208–9). Indonesian middle-class activists want to educate and lead ordinary Indonesians in the direction of democracy—yet the two groups are in many ways strangers to one another. 

Ayu’s inclusion of this difficult issue is a tribute to her political and social perceptiveness, but this gap does haunt the novel in other ways as well.

This thematic issue of social disjuncture is paralleled at the level of form in two ways. Micaela Campbell has argued that though in Saman the villagers of Lubukrantau provided some textual presence of poor Indonesian peasants, even if narrated through the perspective of the middle-class Wis/Saman, in Larung that voice of the ordinary rakyat (the people) disappears completely,

\[17\] Campbell (2005:44–52) makes some of the same points in her MA thesis. I am indebted to her detailed and nuanced discussion of inter-class relations.
replaced by tensions and arguments among the middle-class activists themselves (Campbell 2005:49). Though I generally agree with her argument, I would modify it slightly, for in Larung, the rakyat do appear, but only in the capacity of Anson to represent them synecdochically. Thus, there is a displacement of the variety of the ordinary people with whom the activists work onto the token shoulders of the former Lubukkrantau rubber farmer-turned-pirate. This move greatly diminishes the voice of the rakyat.

The second way in which this disjunction is manifested in the form of the novels is the contrast between the urban, contemporary tales of Saman and the four women, which revolve around sex, gender roles, love, and politics, and the stories of Saman’s childhood and Larung’s relationship to his grandmother. Narratively, these two latter sections are also separated from the others by the fact that they happen further in the past—in Saman, the events of Wis’s childhood in Perabumulih in the early 1960s; and in Larung, Larung’s quest to ‘euthanize’ his grandmother, which is set around 1985. These sections are most prominently characterized by the representation of rural and small-town life, ilmu gaib (mysticism) and the gaib (mysterious, occult), politics, and also by the central presence of three additional female characters: Saman’s mother, Larung’s grandmother, and her friend, Suprihatin. Wis/Saman’s experiences in Lubukkrantau, occurring in 1990, form something of a bridge between the past, village tales and those of the urban future, for while these sections begin to become more deeply engaged in the narrative of New Order politics, corruption, and the struggle for democracy, they also contain passages which tie Wis/Saman to his childhood—his quest to understand what happened to his mother and the siblings who mysteriously disappeared from her womb, his related attraction to Upi, and the three occasions on which he hears voices that warn him of impending danger (Saman: 86, 97, 108).

One way to begin understanding this set of formal disjunctures in the novels is to examine the roles of some of the characters on different levels of the two novels. Campbell has argued that the presence of the two strong ‘mother’ figures, ‘Ibu’ in Saman and Adnjani (the grandmother) in Larung, indicate divisions within the Indonesian women’s movement with regard to the idea of motherhood. Both Ibu and Adnjani are positive figures on the mythic/mystical level of the texts, but exercise a more troubling role on the level of the psychological, realist representation of Saman and Larung as male characters (Campbell 2005:107–10). Thus, though these characters resist patriarchy under the guise of ‘ibuism’ in the mythic/mystical sections of the novels, in the

---

18 ‘Ibuism’ is the name Madelon Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis uses to describe the New
realist sections they are in fact bad ‘mothers’, and the idea of motherhood is either ignored or disparaged by the four modern female characters (Campbell 2005:109–11).

But I would take this comparison, and the tensions it indicates, even further. The sections in the past dealing with Wis’s relationship to his mother and Larung’s relationship to his grandmother, as noted above, are full of elements of magic and the supernatural. Magic may well be considered something *kampung-gan* (hickish, in bad taste), part of an older way of life that many Indonesians would like to leave behind—much as Larung, partially out of love, partially out of hatred and disgust, longs to put his grandmother out of her enfeebled misery (*Larung*:7–9, 16, 32–3, 34, 47, 50, 56, 58). The deployment of magic in these novels occurs almost exclusively in the village sections, though Shakuntala preserves a little of it, at a very much removed, artistic, and mythical level, in imagining ogres to be a part of her life and in seeing herself as a descendant of *peri* (one of the same kind of spirits as those living in the woods behind Wis’s parents’ house in Perabumulih). Yet there is not the same visceral connection with magic in Shakuntala’s narrative—it is a benign presence which allows her to theorize her difference from others, and to narrate it at a mythical rather than a realistic level, making it symbolically more suggestive, but also safer.

The magic of Perabumulih and of Larung’s grandmother and Suprihatin on the other hand, although it can be beneficial to humans, is also dangerous, and has wrenching consequences in the lives of those whom it touches. Babies disappear from a mother’s womb, male family members die, and relatives of those who have gained magic powers can be born missing the power of speech or all of their right limbs and organs. This can be explained on the level of the realist narrative by remembering that Larung, who is taking (or not taking) anti-delusional medicine (*Larung*:16, 48), may have hallucinated some of these stories, while Wis’s encounters with the *gaib* occur when he is in stressed, semi-conscious, or perhaps delusional states.

Yet there is also something more real at stake here as well: the sense of temporal and spatial separation. Larung’s mother describes his grandmother as having been born in a long-past era with a different way of seeing the world (*Larung*:13), while the world of magic is also seen as different from most contemporary reality (*Larung*:46). Similarly, Saman’s mother is described as often being not where she is, but rather where she is not (*Saman*:44). This strange
and frightening world of magic and spirits, mainly in the villages, is also the site where the majority of Indonesia's ordinary people live—fewer of them in the Perabumulih sections, where they are mainly represented by houseboys and poor relations, but certainly in the Lubukrantau sections where Wis helps the rubber-tapping villagers, and in spectral evidence in the section where Larung goes to visit Suprihatin. These are precisely the kinds of people the urban, middle-class activists have so much trouble understanding and connecting with, but they are also the object of their actions precisely because they are a potentially powerful popular force for democratic change in Indonesia.

Suprihatin lives in a village known for being a nest of revolt against the great kingdoms of the past and it has lost some of its members during the slaughter of purported ‘leftists’ of 1965–1966 (Larung:23). Suprihatin's narrative of Calon Arang and Ratna Manjali emphasizes, with a particularly feminist slant, that resentment from those living far from the centres of power does not come into being without cause (‘tidak datang dari kosong’), that people defend themselves from those who marginalize them (Larung:36–40). Though hardly ordinary villagers themselves, Larung and his mother are also defended by Adnjani, his grandmother, and the same Calon Arang comparison appears. Thus, there is reason to see the villages, and magic, as symbolically linked to social subalterns who are at times capable of resisting the power of the central government, even if their resistance is limited and ultimately doomed. In fact, for Ayu herself much of the magic in these sections, though usually considered insanity, is actually just a different kind of rationality (Saraswati 2005:15).19 This ‘rational madness’ might confirm that magic, ilmu gaib, is the resort of those who hold a different way of understanding action and agency in life that is tied to a state of socio-political marginalization.

In this way, the texts’ attempt to dissolve partially geographical and time distances between Jakarta and New York is both paralleled and haunted, in their exploration of cosmopolitanism, by an economic, social, and cultural disjuncture between Jakarta and the villages of Indonesia. This disjuncture results from processes that separate the two ‘absolute’ spaces—city and village—relationally.

Larung, traumatized by past events, as Sears has argued, sees his grandmother as a burden from whom he needs to free himself, feeling both a fear

---

19 The passage in question in this interview with Ayu reads as follows: ‘[...] dan kegilaan muncul dalam tokoh Upi, nenek Larung, ibunya Saman. Akan tetapi, bagi saya bukan suatu kegilaan, tetapi sesuatu yang rasional’. / [...] and insanity appears in the characters of Upi, Larung’s grandmother, and Saman's mother. However, in my mind it's not insanity, but rather something rational.
and visceral disgust at her infirmity caused by extreme old age. This may be, as Sears has suggested, a symbolic representation of the dead weight which village culture holds for many modern urban Indonesian activists, but it also seems to me to hold out the possibility that many contemporary modern Indonesian activists are incapable of bonding with villagers in a way that can lead to new, liberating social relations. In David Harvey’s schema for representing spatial relations, this would be a failure of relational spaces—the spaces in which memories, dreams, and desires combine with actual locations to create geographical conditions that are ‘immaterial but objective’. The failure is that the novels are unable to get beyond the fearful, menacing images of the villages and the rakyat that have haunted many elite and middle-class Indonesians (and Dutch colonialists alike), preventing them from mobilizing these constituencies for transformative, democratic social action. Read in another way, this division can be seen as that (potentially) untranslatable gap between secular modernity and a world seen as ‘enchanted’, to borrow Dipesh Chakrabarty’s terms (Chakrabarty 1997).

This brings us back to gender issues as well. For in the village sequences, it is the women who hold supernatural power—Wis is saved by it several times, but he can never actively employ it. His mother, with her uncanny knowledge of her forest surroundings and her ability to step into the realm of the mambang and peri, Larung’s grandmother, and Suprihatin, her own village’s protector, are the figures who are able to manipulate or interact with supernatural forces. When women hold power here it is in marginal circumstances often associated with past events. The novel thereby suggests that women’s increasing marginalization from power is an effect of modernization. Can the modern women in Ayu’s novels, with their network of overlapping subjectivities, eventually overcome this marginalization in order to create, as Sears has suggested they may be able to, an effective, non-masculinized way of solving social problems?

Still, there is another complication here. The fact that these women protectors of the villages and families are often from nobler backgrounds perpetuates the notion of the elite leadership of ordinary peasants and returns us to the tensions between elites and ordinary people. If, assuming Sears is correct, the young women heroines of the novels represent the potential for a

20 James Siegel (1998) makes this point in relation to the riots of May 1998 which occurred in Jakarta and Solo, Central Java. The same fear can be found in Louis Couperus’s novel The hidden force (De stille kracht 1985 [1900]), where local Javanese are seen as an inscrutable lot among whom resides an implacable ‘hidden force’ which will bring all Dutch colonial schemes to ruin. It is as though Dutch fear of the entire native population has morphed into elite and middle-class Indonesian fears of the lower classes (Couperus 1985:130)!
new kind of social agency and power, can these cosmopolitan women heroines create a different, less or even non-hierarchical relationship with ordinary Indonesians, rural or urban, in order to surmount the social disjuncture facing pro-democracy activists? Or would middle-class, female elite activists merely substitute for the older generation of female magical protectors as the socially (relatively) more powerful protectors of the villages? These are questions the novels leave unresolved.

Conclusion

Ayu Utami’s *Saman* and *Larung* point out the ways in which patriarchal control of women, including their sexuality, is intimately tied to a masculine culture of political violence. They suggest that cosmopolitan locations, such as New York City, may be attractive temporary refuges for Indonesian women and men who suffer under such regimes, but that they are ultimately flawed refuges, partially as a result of the global power relations in which developed nations dominate and by which they profit at the expense of those within developing nations. In so doing, *Saman* and *Larung* deconstruct the binary between the national and the cosmopolitan by showing how democratic struggle in the former is necessary for successful realization of the latter. However, on many levels, the novels embody the painful, socially and historically constructed disjunctures between city and village, modernity and tradition, women and men, and modern rationality and its alternative, ‘other’ forms of imagining how the world works. In such a way, the novels also assert that the successful realization of a global cosmopolitanism is obstructed by these disjunctures, and, particularly, the gap that yawns between the absolute and relational spaces of city and village, of secular and ‘enchanted’ spatio-temporalities. That the novels reveal an acute, if partial, awareness of their own thematic limits (for example, in Saman’s reflections regarding his inability to truly understand the villagers), attests to Ayu Utami’s principled efforts to represent existing realities unflinchingly. This circumscribed awareness which the novels display of their own imaginative limits also implicitly suggests that efforts at dialogue, at building the necessary bridges so visible in work by many Indonesian NGOs, must in fact become more sensitive to relational space, to ordinary Indonesians’ ways of comprehending their world. For, as argued above, it is only in such democratizing struggles in each and every individual country in the world that a truly non-exploitative cosmopolitan culture can be born.
References

Amiruddin, Mariana (2003). ‘Sex and text (sexts): Konsep pembebasan seksualitas perempuan lewat sastra’, Jurnal Perempuan 30 (July):89–98.

Anderson, Amanda (1998). ‘Cosmopolitanism, universalism, and the divided legacies of modernity’, in: Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (eds), Cosmopolitics: Thinking and feeling beyond the nation, pp. 265–89. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bandel, Katrin (2006). Sastra, perempuan, seks. Yogyakarta: Jalasutra.

Brennan, Timothy (2003). ‘Cosmopolitanism and internationalism’, in: Daniele Archibugi (ed.), Debating cosmopolitics, pp. 40–50. London: Verso.

Budiman, Kris (2003). ‘Dari Saman ke Larung, menemukan kembali sisa-sisa femininitas’, Jurnal Perempuan 30 (July):7–19.

Calhoun, Craig (2003). ‘The class consciousness of frequent travellers: Towards a critique of actually existing cosmopolitanism’, in: Daniele Archibugi (ed.), Debating cosmopolitics, 86–116. London: Verso.

Campbell, Micaela (2005). ‘No woman is an island: Reconceptualizing feminine identity in the literary works of Ayu Utami’. MA thesis, University of Victoria, Department of Pacific and Asian Studies.

Campbell, Micaela (2007). ‘Mother/non-mother: Ibuism as subtext in the literary works of Ayu Utami’, Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs 41–2:41–66.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh (1997). ‘The time of history and the times of Gods’, in: Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (eds), The politics of culture in the shadow of capital, pp. 35–60. Durham: Duke University Press.

Cheah, Pheng (1998). ‘Given culture: Rethinking cosmopolitical freedom in transnationalism’, in: Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (eds), Cosmopolitics: Thinking and feeling beyond the nation, pp. 290–328. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Clark, Marshall (2004). ‘Too many Wisanggenis: Reinventing the wayang at the turn of the century’, Indonesia and the Malay World 32 (March):62–79.

Couperus, Louis (1985). The hidden force. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press [Originally published as De Stille Kracht. Amsterdam: L.J. Veen, 1900].

Djadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis, Madelon (1992). ‘Ibuism and priyayization: Path to power?’, in: Elsbeth Locher-Scholten and Anke Niehof (eds), Indonesian women in focus: Past and present notions, pp. 43–51. Leiden: KITLV Press.

Harvey, David (2005). A brief history of neoliberalism. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hatley, Barbara (1999). ‘New directions in Indonesian women’s writing’, Asian Studies Review 23–4 (December):449–60.

Klein, Naomi (2007). The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism. Toronto: Knopf Canada.
Lazarus, Neil (1999). Nationalism and cultural practice in the postcolonial world. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Loekito, Medy (2003). ‘Perempuan sastra pria’, Jurnal Perempuan 30 (July):65–76.

Marching, Soe Tjen (2007a). ‘Descriptions of female sexuality in Ayu Utami’s Saman’, Journal of Southeast Asian Studies 38–1 (February):133–46.

Marching, Soe Tjen (2007b). ‘The representation of the female body in two contemporary Indonesian novels: Ayu Utami’s Saman and Fira Basuki’s Jendela-jendela’, Indonesia and the Malay World 35:231–45.

Reid, Anthony (1993). Southeast Asia in the age of commerce 1450–1680. Vol. 2, Expansion and crisis. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Saraswati, Wahyuni Puji (2005). ‘Ayu Utami: Dunia kesenian harus kritis’, Majalah Creatif 1–1 (2005):14–7.

Sears, Laurie J. (2007a). ‘Postcolonial identities, feminist criticism, and Southeast Asian studies’, in: Laurie J. Sears (ed.), Knowing Southeast Asian subjects, pp. 35–74. Seattle and Singapore: University of Washington Press in conjunction with NUS Press.

Sears, Laurie J. (2007b). ‘Reading Ayu Utami: Notes toward a study of trauma and the archive in Indonesia’, Indonesia 83 (April):17–39.

Siegel, James T. (1998). ‘Early thoughts on the violence of May 13 and 14, 1998 in Jakarta’, Indonesia 66 (October):75–108.

Utami, Ayu (1998). Saman. Jakarta: Kalam & Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia.

Utami, Ayu (2001). Larung. Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia.

Utami, Ayu (2005). Saman. Translation by Pamela Allen. Jakarta: Equinox.