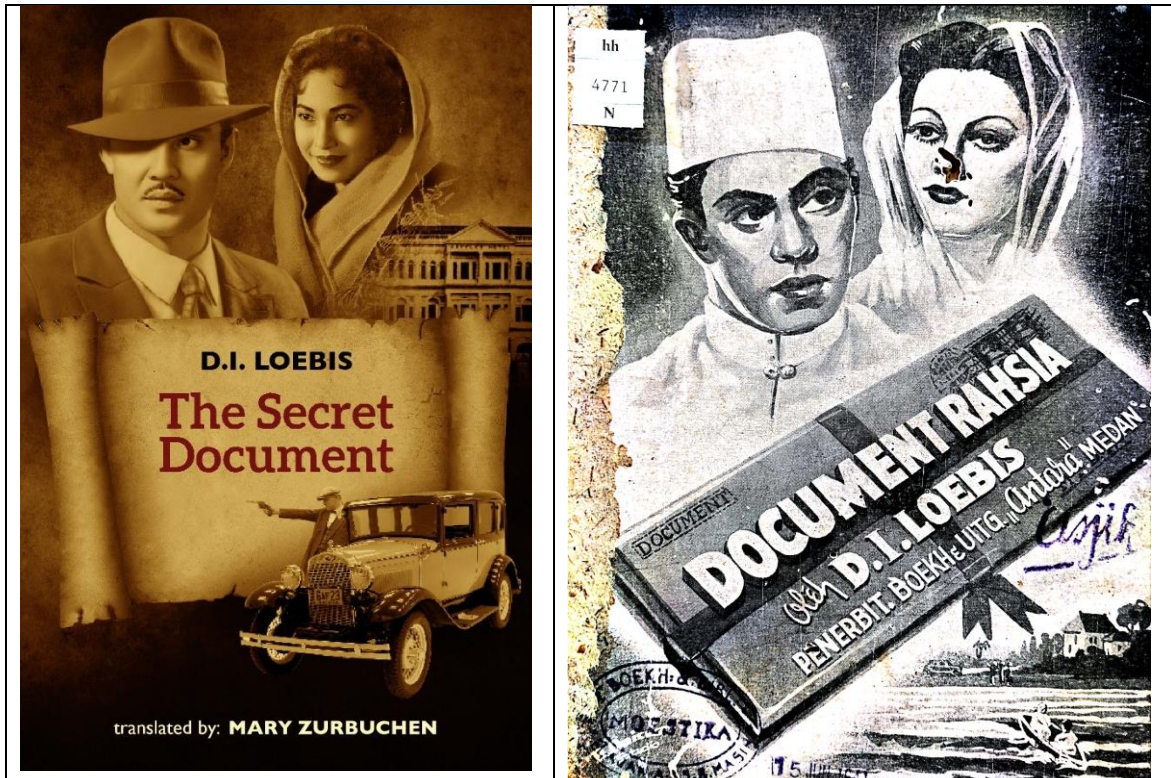


BOOK REVIEW

The Secret Document: A Detective Story

D.I. Loebis, Translation by Mary Zurbuchen

Jakarta: Lontar Foundation, 2022, ISBN: 9786237150176.



Translation of Indonesian or Malay popular novels into foreign languages are still rare to find. For many years I have been teaching courses in the Indonesian and Malay languages and literature at Leiden University and I have had many difficulties finding course materials in English translation of Indonesia's or Malaysia's popular novels to introduce them to my Dutch and other foreign students. This fact reflects the public perspective, both in the academic and non-academic fields, towards literary works that are considered 'dime' or 'dubbeltjes'— to borrow S. Roolvink's term (1950) which is translated by A. Teeuw as '*pitjisan*' (Roolvink, 1952). Such literary genre is looked down upon as having no literary value and is even considered useless. Considering this fact, the publication of this book is very encouraging. According to its publisher (The Lontar Foundation) *The Secret Document* is the first-ever title from the "Medan novels" to appear in English translation. I hope that this is an initial step to introduce much more Indonesian popular novels, both from the colonial and post-colonial eras, to international readers through translating them into English or other foreign languages. In this respect, we should be grateful to Mary [Sabine] Zurbuchen who has translated this Indonesian popular novel into English and the Lontar Foundation, an independent and not-for-profit organization based in Jakarta that vigorously promotes Indonesian literature and culture through the translation into English for global readers.

As mentioned above, *The Secret Document* is categorized as ‘roman Medan’ (a Medan novel). It is translated from Lubis’ work *Document Rahsia* published by and the printing house ‘Antara’ in Medan in 1941 (see illustration). Published in the pre-independence years in North Sumatra until the late 1960s, such ‘pulp fiction’ – to borrow Marije Plomp’s term (2012) – reflected the era’s nationalist movements promoting anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism, and represented an antithesis to the cultural domination exercised by the Batavia-based Dutch colonial government. Originating from diverse ethnic groups and religious backgrounds, the authors of Medan novels are the true anti-colonial activists (*kaum pergerakan*) and journalists. At that time, the profession of journalist was often combined with being a writer, as the seasoned journalist Adinegoro argued that a journalist should not merely be a journalist but also a writer. Hence one of the prominent themes of Medan novels is critique of Dutch (later Japanese) colonialism presented in adventure, espionage and detective stories that arouse the curiosity of the readers. Some of them used pen names (pseudonym) to avoid prosecution by the colonial administrators of the Dutch East Indies under laws that curbed press freedom. D.I. Loebis himself was a journalist who worked for some vernacular newspapers and magazines, such as *Pertja Timur*, *Pewartu Deli* and *Waspada* published in Medan. Earlier, he published *Lily van Angkola* (Lily of Angkola) in 1939 and *Sitti Dajuhari* in 1940 (Lubis, 2018: 247).

The original version of *The Secret Document* and many other titles were published in pocketbook format, with a total of about 80 to 100 pages, issued once or twice a month. Each title has a serial number, publication date and year of publication. Such light novels of this large corpus were released in book series, like ‘Doenia Pengalaman’, ‘Loekisan Poedjangga’, ‘Tjenderawasih’, ‘Suasana Baru’, ‘Gelora’ and ‘Menara’. They were published in Medan and its smaller surrounding towns, such as Tebing Tinggi, Sigli and Langsa. A similar genre then also appeared in Padang and Bukittinggi in the 1930s and 1940s (Sudarmoko, 2008). Spurring activity of independent local publishers, Medan novels brought together diverse writers and readers from across the archipelago. Unlike the series of novels published by Balai Poestaka (*Commissie voor de Inlandsche School en Volkslectuur*) in Batavia that were considered ‘high literature’, the Medan novels appealed to the general public. In this way, they helped to spread and increase literacy in the Latin script among the broad public and non-elite locals, overcoming the class boundaries that were so evident during colonial times.

From the first and final pages of many numbered editions, it can be gleaned that the authors of Medan novels came from various regions in Indonesia, such as Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, Bali and Sulawesi. The most prominent of them were from the Minangkabau ethnic group of West Sumatra, such as Hamka, Joesoef Sou’yb, S. Djarens, Taher Samad, A. Damhoeri and Saiful U.A. After this came authors from the Mandailing ethnic group of Tapanuli in the western part of North Sumatra, such as Matu Mona (Hasboellah Parindoeri), Alinoedin Loebis, H.M. Hanafiah Lubis (Mahal’s) and D.I. Loebis (‘D.I.’ is an abbreviation of ‘Djundjung Ibrahim’). Many of them briefly migrated to Medan or made this city their domicile. Medan developed quickly and significantly from the late 19th century after the tobacco plantation industry (*onderneming*) in Deli was started by the Dutch which attracted people from various parts of Indonesia and Asia migrating there. The social interaction with regional and international migrants created a social dynamic that was unique to Medan as the city grew rapidly and developed popular culture and modernity. The glamour and modernity of Medan at the time was attractively reflected in the narrative of Medan novels, depicting the love stories of young lovers and love affairs between men and women that could have been a reflection of the contemporary ‘modern’ social life of Medan (Suryadi, 2019).

The Secret Document tells the story of a young Indonesian man named Talib Agian who becomes an unwitting participant in a smuggling plot with political intentions involving a mysterious letter. He just arrived in the busy Tanjong Pagar business district of Singapore from

Batavia when a porter in rags with a face like a TAMILIAN from Madras approaches him and hands him a piece of paper (*setjarik kertas*) with message instructing him to go immediately to Hotel Metropole and stay there since someone has been reserved the room number 9 for him under the false name 'Mr. Ariffin'. At the same time, a young boy with simple clothes throws a piece of paper in front of him through the door of a slow-moving taxi crossing North Bridge Road. The message on the piece of paper says that at 9 pm three persons who he never met before will come to meet him in the hotel. Talib Agian ('Mr. Ariffin') arrives at the 'hotel' which, in fact, is only a pension building, and is welcomed by a Eurasian man named Fernandez. In line with the message Talib received, at 9 pm, three people knock on his door at the pension house.

The three men were all quite young; not one of them looked to be over thirty. One was a Russian by the name of Ivan Kropotkin. He was tall and thin and dressed all in white, except for the red tie around his neck. The next was a Chinese named Chen Tso-lin, pale and thin, also in white, except for his yellow shoes. He had a red tie like Kropotkin's. The third was an Indonesian man named Jamaldin Tamam. He had an attractive brown complexion, was shorter than the other two, and was dressed in khaki with a red tie. The three of them appeared unthreatening, and they looked to be just regular people. (p. 7)

The gangster-like stature and physical appearance of the three men frightens Talib. They hand over a secret document in a sealed envelope to Talib as well as 25.000 rupiah in cash to be handed over to the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party) leaders in Batavia. It is the beginning of Talib's unwanted and unintentional involvement with a criminal and political conspiracy following him from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur and Penang that threatens his fate and fortunes.

After chatting with Kropotkin, Chen and Imam, Talib realizes whom he was engaging with – members the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) abroad (in Singapore) who wants used him to smuggle the document and the money to their comrades in Batavia. Talib feels in danger and tries to run away but is unsuccessful. Then he tries to go back to his home village in Deli. During his escape with the document and the money, he is robbed and beaten until he faints. After sobering up, he finds himself lying in the house of a rich man named Joesoef Abdat, a Malay descended from Arab Hadramaut people living in Kuala Lumpur. He has a beautiful daughter named Siti Daphne who cares for Talib. He then falls in love with her and his love is reciprocated.

Talib feels he is continually being followed by Kropotkin and his gang. For safety reasons, he hands over the document and the money to Siti Daphne. But alas, she is then kidnapped by the members of an unidentified criminal group. Talib succeeds in liberating Siti by cleverly disguising himself as a taxi driver. Finally, he arrives in Deli, but Kropotkin's people continually hunt him. Feeling constantly threatened, he then throws away the secret document into a paper kiln for Chinese prayers. It is immediately burnt to ashes (p. 44).

The situation then improves. Back on the Malay Peninsula, Talib departs for Kuala Lumpur, where he is received by the Abdat family with open arms and radiant faces. Several days later he is married to Siti Daphne by her own father. The wedding is celebrated in a simple fashion, without the luxury that is often found among wealthy Malays. Daphne and him were of the same mind that "it was better to spend the celebration money on traveling rather than big parties, as the latter often bring derision from those not invited and criticism from those who are." (p.45).

And what happens to the three communists who had threatened Talib Agian?

Ivan Kropotkin was found dead in a house on Seletar Road in Singapore – so the *Straits Times* reported. His death was thought to be a suicide. Jamaldin Tamam became an exile, unwelcome in the Netherlands Indies, and so he wandered here and there in the wide world. And Chen Tso-lin? Chen returned to Canton, where he later played an active role in the Kuomintang, and became a valuable lieutenant of the famed Borodin.” (p.45)

Reading *The Secret Document*, it is clear that its author was inspired by the communist movement in Indonesia. The name of a figure in the story, Jamaldin Tamam, alludes us to Djamaluddin Tamim, one of the communist activists from West Sumatra. After the communist uprising in Silungkang in 1927, he fled to Singapore. There, he became a follower of Tan Malaka. During his escape, Djamaluddin Tamim was assisted by Syekh Abdul Wahab, who provided him with work and lodging. He also worked with Tahir Jalaluddin in Perak. When the Dutch arrested Tahir during his 1927 visit to Sumatra and threatened to exile him to Digul, Tamim under the pseudonym Tunarman wrote a series of articles in *Bintang Timur* demanding his release.

Actually, some Medan novels echoed Tan Malaka’s life story and his struggle against the Dutch colonialism. This mysterious and most hunted figure of PID (*Politie Inlichtingen Dienst* / The Netherlands Indies Secret Police) has inspired some writers of Medan novels as represented in Matu Mona’s *Spionage Dienst: Patjar Merah Indonesia* (1938) and Yusja’s *Moetiara Berlampoer* (1940) and its sequel *Patjar Merah Kembali ke Tanah Air* (1940). D.I. Loebis in *The Secret Document* illustrates how the local and overseas communist activists worked on secret missions to deceive the Dutch East Indies authorities.

The Secret Document is supplemented with two essays: The first one is an introductory essay by Koko Hendri Lubis entitled “*The Secret Document: A Detective Story from Medan*” (pp. vii-xv) in which he describes D.I. Loebis’ life and the socio cultural and historical aspects of detective stories of Medan novels. The second one is my own essay entitled “The Medan Novel” (pp. 99-117). The essay, which constitutes a short version of my article (Suryadi, 2019), explores the nature and historical context of Medan novels. Both essays are intended to provide the international readers with an understanding of the position of Medan novels in the history of literature and popular culture in Indonesia.

I must say that Mary [Sabine] Zurbuchen’s translation is excellent. We don't need to doubt the ability of the translator since she has been a reliable translator working for the Lontar Foundation for a long time. She had translated dozens of Indonesian poems and short stories into English. After all, the author of *The Language of Balinese Shadow Theater* (1987) has very extensive knowledge about Indonesia. Theoretically, translating a popular novel like D.I. Loebis’ *Document Rahsia* is probably easier than those considered to have literary value like Pramoedya Ananta Toer's or others literati’s works. However, as I mentioned above, translating Indonesian pop novels into foreign languages is a great opportunity to introduce the other side of Indonesian literature and popular culture. In my opinion, this laudable step should also be followed by other Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia.

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