

## **Buru Island and Political Detainees in the Memory of Indonesian Literature: A New Historicist Study of *Amba* by Laksmi Pamuntjak**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In Indonesia's sociopolitical context, Buru Island is one of the areas often associated with political detainees. Buru Island is also the setting of several Indonesian novels that highlight political detainees' stories, notably *Amba* (2012) by Laksmi Pamuntjak. This paper aims to describe the locus of Buru Island, Indonesia, as one of the places for political detainees during the country's New Order era and afterward, and as depicted in a number of Indonesian literary works, particularly in Pamuntjak's *Amba*, by using the perspective of new historicism. Through this study, it is hoped that the significance of Buru Island for many people and particularly the relatives of political detainees and fighters for human rights yearning for justice could be brought to light and better understood. As one of the literary works retelling the life of the political detainees on Buru Island, *Amba* can be considered as a novel endeavoring to reopen the collective memory of the Indonesian people to the mystery surrounding the event of the Movement of September 30, 1965 and the exile of political detainees from Java to the Island.

*Keywords:* Buru Island, political detainees, *Amba*, Indonesian Communist Party, collective memory

## INTRODUCTION

The island of Buru, locally called Buru Island, spans 8,473.2 km<sup>2</sup> in land area with a coastline of 427.2 km in length, geographically located among the islands of Maluku. Based on Law No. 46 of 1999, renewed with Law No. 6 of 2000, it was given the status of regency, and the region locally known as District Buru was formed. Along with developments over time, in 2012, District Buru was divided into ten *kecamatan*s, namely, Districts Namlea, Airbuaya, Waeapo, Waplau, Batubual, Lolong Guba, Waelata, Fena Leisela, Teluk Kaiely, and Liliyaly (“Kabupaten Buru”; Einrumkuy 124). Though located in a region far to the east of the island of Java, where the country’s capital city Jakarta is, Buru Island has become one of the most well-known islands in the archipelago. It is because during the era known in the country as New Order, the island was used as a place for the exile of political detainees, particularly those who were considered members of the PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia or Indonesian Communist Party) and thought to be involved in the historic event known as the Movement of September 30, 1965 (Pattinama 14).

The September 30, 1965 Movement (Gerakan September 30, 1965, or popularly known as G30S) was one of the political events that occurred in Jakarta, Indonesia, during the Old Order era. Six high-ranking army officers, namely Lieutenant General Posthumous Ahmad Yani, Major General Raden Soeprpto, Major General Mas Tirtodarmo Haryono, Major General Siswondo Parman, Brigadier General Donald Isaac Panjaitan, and Brigadier General Sutoyo Siswodiharjo, as well as Lettu Pierre Andreas Tendean (General AH Nasution’s aide) and Ade Irma Nasution (General AH Nasution’s daughter), were assassinated (Holtzappel 276; Boden 507). These assassinations were central to what would be remembered as the G30S. The New Order under military general Suharto, who launched a successful counter-coup and used the Movement to seize power, saw the mass killings of thousands of Indonesians in various regions who were either red-tagged and accused of being Communist Party members or their sympathizers (Rossa 55).

Asvi Warman Adam explains that there are many versions of who the perpetrators of the G30S were, and each possible perpetrator had a different motive (17). Ragna Boden argues that, as far as it is known, the events of 1965 were related to the struggle for influence between the major Indonesian power elites: the president, the armed forces, and the PKI (507). Meanwhile, according to the Indonesian military, the Movement was a PKI institutional strategy to seize state power from President Soekarno. Framed in this way, the Movement was portrayed not merely as a rebellion or a coup but the beginning of a social revolution, which gave the military under Suharto a reason to crack down on all suspected dissidents (Rossa 91; Boden 507).

However, the mass killings were never discussed in official education during the New Order, neither the process nor the number of victims (Adam 18). The facts surrounding these grave murders by the thousands were systematically obscured, with the resulting uncertainty relegating the events to public forgetfulness. According to the Fact-Finding Commission that was formed after the bloody incident, the number of victims was 78,000. Kopkamtib (Command for the Restoration of Security and Order), a central organization directly under the command of Indonesian President Suharto and founded on October 10, 1965), reports that the casualties numbered one million. Meanwhile, Robert Cribb offers the figure of 500,000 (Adam 18). However, Suharto, who seized power after the G30S, insisted that the Indonesian Communist Party was the leader of the Movement. Thus, PKI members and people merely suspected of being affiliated with the PKI were arrested and sentenced as political prisoners. Buru Island is one of the areas used to imprison these political prisoners.

When discussing Buru Island in the context of Indonesian literature, readers are always reminded of big names such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Hersri Setiawan, writers who were political detainees exiled on Buru Island for years. Their experience as political detainees is recorded in their books *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu (The Mute's Soliloquy: A Memoir)* (Toer, 1995) and *Memoar Pulau Buru (Memoirs of Buru Island)* (Setiawan, 2004). More than fifteen years after Toer published his influential book and about forty years from when he was first detained on Buru Island, *Amba* by Laksmi Pamuntjak, an author from a younger generation who did not directly experience the tumultuous event, was published. In an interview with *Antaraneews.com*, Pamuntjak stated that she and her friends during the New Order Era were force-fed versions of Suharto's official government statement that the PKI was responsible for the September 30, 1965 Movement ("Amba' karya Laksmi Pamuntjak"). In addition, the stigma of communism was attached to family members and children of the victims and their descendants. Though Pamuntjak did not experience the events of 1965 directly, she did have some friends whose relatives, for years, were affected by the continuing stigma of communism. Their lives were hampered, they were ridiculed, and they faced difficulties in school and at work. Despite the severe consequences of these historical events, Pamuntjak noted that, based on a 2009 survey, more than half of the student respondents from Jakarta claimed that they did not know anything about what happened in 1965. Such were the reasons Pamuntjak wrote and published *Amba*.

*Amba* tells the story of the title character's search to find traces of the whereabouts of her sweetheart, Bhisma, a political detainee after the September 30, 1965 Movement. In this journey, which takes her to Buru Island, she is accompanied by a former political detainee named Zulfikar, a friend of Bhisma

who returned to Jakarta. In Buru Island, Amba visits several places where former political detainees were exiled for years. Thus, some places in Buru Island have become part of the setting in *Amba*. These places are, among others, Namlea, Airbuaya, and Waeapo. Amba also meets a friend of Bhisma's named Manalisa, from whom she learned the story of Bhisma's stay on Buru Island and from whom she got letters that Bhisma had written to her. The letters were never sent and were only stored in bamboo tubes. Bhisma's life story is finally revealed in the letters, whose contents essentially read like a diary.

The purpose of the present article is to describe the locus of Buru Island, Indonesia, as one of the places for political detainees during the New Order era and afterward, and as depicted in a number of Indonesian literary works, particularly in *Amba*, by using the perspective of new historicism. Through this study, it is hoped that the significance of Buru Island for many people, particularly the relatives of political detainees and fighters for human rights yearning for justice, could be brought to light and better understood.

New historicism is one of the approaches to literary studies that appeared in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Stephen Greenblatt first used it in 1982 to offer a new perspective on Renaissance studies by stressing the interrelation between the literary text and the various social, economic, and political powers surrounding it (Gallagher and Greenblatt 1-5; Habib 762; Budianta 2). In the perspective of new historicism, literary works are inseparable from social, economic, and political praxis because such works take part in them (Budianta 2-3; Gallagher and Greenblatt 14-15; Habib 762-764). The new historicist approach is undergirded by the following assumptions, which are culled from Michael Payne's introduction to *The Greenblatt Reader* and several other sources.

First, the framework considers culture as a semiotic system, a network of signs. Second, it is opposed to specific disciplines' hegemony and prefers an interdisciplinary methodology to discover new knowledge. Third, its advocates assume that history is not only what happened in the past (as a sequence of events), but also the telling of events (making a story). Thus, the truth of history becomes apparent through critical reflection on the many stories told. Fourth, the approach considers history at first as a kind of discourse, even while it does not refuse the actuality of events. Fifth, the specific procedure of new historicism begins with attention to happenings or anecdotes to arouse skepticism toward the grand narration of history or the conventional description of important events during certain periods such as the Renaissance. Sixth, new historicism is suspicious of any occurrence of unity in the telling of history, any telling that

offers a monolithic depiction of a culture or a historical period. Seventh, because it is impossible to go beyond the moment of history itself, new historicism sees all history as depending on the time of its presence and the moment when its existence is constructed. Eighth, new historicism indirectly critiques formalist approaches such as new criticism, which treats literature as historical icons; instead, it concerns itself mainly with the relationship between literature and history. Ninth, in new historicism, a literary work is considered an object related to the writer and the reader and understood as an object inseparable from its textual construction. Finally, in the view of new historicism, history is not a mere background of a literary work because history and literature are intimately related to each other and cannot function separately (Payne 18-31; Gallagher and Greenblatt 11-14; Habib 762-764; Budianta 2 -3).

In its practice, new historicism makes a parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts from the same period of origin in history (Barry 172; Habib 764). In that case, the reading of a historical event depicted in a literary text should be read parallel to the corresponding one narrated in historiography. The two texts should be given the same importance and should be continuously made to inform and question each other (Barry 172; Habib 764).

Moreover, in its practice, new historicism places a literary text in the frame of a non-literary text. Documents of history are not subordinated as contexts; on the contrary, they are analyzed as co-texts instead of contexts. The text and co-text are seen as expressions of the same moment in history and interpreted accordingly (Barry 173). In this regard, the approach is different from literary sociology, which tends to read historical documents merely as a background of a literary work.

The present paper adheres to the approach of new historicism and interprets the data in this research accordingly. First, it reads the literary text and the historiographical text as both phenomena of history. More particularly, this paper employs a descriptive, interpretive, and qualitative approach in reading the novel *Amba* and other relevant sources. Second, it focuses on both the literary text and the text of history in assessing the issues of state power and the method of this power's preservation through official narratives. More importantly, it analyzes the texture of human experience as they are interwoven in the narrative of political history and serve to resist or at least interrogate official history.

## Political Detainees in the New Order Era on Buru Island in *Amba*

Pamuntjak first published *Amba* in September 2012. It is one of the few novels that invite Indonesian readers to recollect the history and life stories of political detainees in the era of Orde Baru. The novel has also been published overseas. It was translated into German as *Alle Farben Rot* by Martine Heinschke (2017) and into English as *The Question of Red* by Laksmi Pamuntjak herself (2016). The translation of the title of the novel from *Amba* (Indonesia) to *Alle Farben Rot* (Germany) and *Question of the Red* (English) puts the emphasis on the color which was symbolic of the Indonesian Communist Party, with its familiar emblem of the hammer and sickle on a red background.

Though written in the twenty-first century, *Amba* enlarges the memory and meaning of Indonesian history, particularly the events surrounding the Movement of September 30, 1965 that saw 12,000 people from Java Island separated from their families and exiled to Buru Island. This much-contested historical conjuncture rendered Buru Island as an important place in and symbol of Indonesian political history and literature. Besides being known as a place for political detainees, Buru Island is also known as Tefaat, short for Tempat Pemanfaatan, which translates to "Exploitation Place" (Alkatiri, "Seven Books" 3). The exiles consisted of political detainees from Group B, namely, people considered indirectly involved in the G30S but nevertheless regarded as cadres of the Indonesian Communist Party (Alkatiri, "Seven Books" 7).

The literary writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer tells the exiles' story, specifically of the first wave of political detainees that departed to Buru Island on August 17th, 1969 (2). Toer himself was among the first wave that numbered 500, and his novel recounts history from the perspective of the first-hand witness. Meanwhile, by way of narrative remembering, Pamuntjak revisits and reconstructs history and depicts how the exiles came to Buru Island, how they passed their first days, how they struggled and survived, and how they eventually returned to their families.

Several places on Buru Island serve as the setting for events in *Amba*. Among others, they are Namle, Waeapo, Kepala Air, Air Buaya, Savanajaya, and the place more specifically referred to as Tefaat and associated with the image of Buru Island as a whole. According to the historian Zefry Alkatiri, Buru Island was chosen as a place for political detainees for three reasons. First, Buru Island is located far away from the capital city, whose political temperature is volatile. Second, choosing Buru Island lightened the government's financial burden of making the program *Pelita* (*Pembangunan Lima Tahun* or the Five-Year Development)

a success. Indonesia's development plan in the New Order era was divided into five-year periods. Third, the choice was made for the sake of not being distracted from continuing the government's national development plan since 1945, a plan which focused on building dams for irrigation and agriculture (Alkatiri, "Three Wives" 51). On Buru Island, political detainees provided for their own life necessities without being dependent on the state financial budget. According to Hersri Setiawan, one of the former political detainees who once dwelled on Buru Island, the island was initially intended to be a graveyard for communists. However, because the political detainees turned out to possess a sufficiently strong will to live, the government thought they could survive, and their labor could be utilized to turn the fierce forest into a fertile landscape with plantations and fields of growing rice plants (508).

In *Amba*, the character of Bhisma is classified as a Group B political detainee, a group consisting of those who were deemed to be involved with the Indonesian Communist Party. He was arrested in Yogyakarta on October 19, 1965, after attending a discussion at Universitas Res Publika (Pamuntjak 289). Jakarta is far from Yogyakarta, and this geographical detail is very important. It implies that although the September 30, 1965 Movement took place in Jakarta, it had a very broad impact. Apart from arresting members of the Indonesian Communist Party, which was accused of being the perpetrator of the G30S, people who were deemed affiliated with the party from various regions and in distant places were likewise convicted without any due process. In effect, Bhisma was arrested merely for being friends with members of Lekra (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat or People's Cultural Institution) and, by extension of this logic, considered a sympathizer of the Indonesian Communist Party. A cultural organization under the Indonesian Communist Party, Lekra was founded on August 17, 1950 by D.N. Aidit, M.S. Ashar, A.S. Dharta, and Njoto, who were known leaders and members of the Indonesian Communist Party (Moeljanto and Ismail 9-10).

In the novel, through Zulfikar's narration to Samuel, a witness to the arrival of political prisoners to the Island, it is revealed that though exiled on Buru Island, Bhisma was not a member of Indonesian Communist Party, nor was he a member of Lekra. However, he was close to CGMI (Consentrasi Gerakan Mahasiswa Indonesia or Indonesian Students' Movement Concentration), a progressive organization in Yogya. He was friends with painters in Lekra. He became a doctor at a polyclinic managed by Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia or Indonesian Women's Movement) in Tanjung Priok and at a small hospital in Kediri. Furthermore, he graduated from an educational institution in East Germany. The government used these aforementioned associations as a basis for claiming that he was affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party and thus needed to be arrested (Pamuntjak 329).

The novel dramatizes how, a few days before the arrest of students and activists, Bhisma and Amba happened to attend a discussion at Universitas Res Publika and visit artists at an art gallery named Sanggar Bumi Tarung whose artists were mostly members of Lekra (Zulkifli 74). The names of the artists of Bumi Tarung mentioned in *Amba* are, among others, Amrus, Djoko Pekik, and Batara Lubis (Pamuntjak 236-237; Zulkifli 72-75).

Pamuntjak populates *Amba* with characters of former political detainees once imprisoned in Buru Island. Besides them, she introduces the fictional characters Bhisma, Zulfikar, and Zakir. The presence of fictional characters representing common people enables both the writer and the reader to consider the life of political detainees on Buru Island from a perspective different from and thus enriching the historical textures of the representation of famous Lekra figures in earlier works by Toer and Setiawan. The narratives of the fictional characters serve to augment the historical experiences of actual political detainees, thereby allowing the author to dramatize the injustices experienced by both fictional and historical characters who were punished for crimes they were merely accused of by the authority, which equates the law with state power. In the context of Indonesian politics and literary history, Toer and Setiawan, who were Lekra writers, were not only detained on Buru Island. Their books were also banned by the state, thereby preventing the public from accessing firsthand historical information narrated by exiles. After the reign of the New Order ended in 1998, the literary works of Lekra members were finally made available and accessible to the public.

The location of the fateful discussion that Bhisma attended is a fascinating detail in the novel. In fact, no such Universitas Res Publika ever existed in Yogyakarta. Rather, such a university once existed in Jakarta. Certain people who believed in the military's version of the G30S attempted to demolish and succeeded in severely damaging the the buildings of the university because of its association with the Indonesian Communist Party. This particular occurrence demonstrates how universities were targeted by unjust and violent actions fomented by false accusations and how the lives of university students and professors were endangered or ruined. From its ruins, a new university was erected. President Soekarno gave it the name of Trisakti University and formally opened it on November 29, 1965 ("A Brief History"). The seeming mix-up in the novel of the university's name and location may have either been intentional or unintentional on the part of the author. Regardless, the amalgamation of historical details and the meaning they draw out about how one person like Bhisma is branded a dissident or a criminal based on surface associations are significant.



## **Dark Memory of Political Detainees from the Perspective of New Historicism**

In the novel, the arrival of political detainees for the first time at Buru Island was recounted through the memories of Samuel. He lived on the island together with his uncle, the Head of the Representative Office of Pertamina (Perusahaan Pertambangan Minyak dan Gas Bumi Negara or State Oil and Gas Mining Company) on Buru Island, and his uncle's family. Regarding Samuel's recollections, the section reads:

He preferred to be alone, recording, and noting by heart: seldom were there important figures and events which escaped his notice. It was likewise when the local government official told them for the first time late in the 1960's that many strangers which were not merely tens but even thousands in number would arrive and inhabit this island. They were not ordinary strangers, continued the local government official, they were of a different kind, who would not dwell on the coast but would penetrate far inland, would not steal sago (people's staple food on Maluku Islands) like petty thieves but would break through the forest to work on making asphalt roads. Their number would reach 12,000 while we were only 7,000... They were banished people, communist people. We shunned them. They were dangerous. That evening, when the first wave of the banished people arrived at Buru Island, exhausted, stunned, and mute in rumpled khaki-colored uniforms, Samuel watched from afar ... (Pamuntjak 26-27).

The above passage from the novel highlights the exiles' dignity and how their arrival in large numbers signified the coming of a robust labor force. The government labeled them as political detainees, banished people, and dangerous communist party members. The authority dominated them, their identities were generalized, and the island population was conditioned to shun them. Nevertheless, many of them, including Bhisma and his friends, were innocent. Furthermore, while the government vilified the exiles, it also exploited their labor power to build roads, make rice paddy fields, and grow plants for food and trade (Pamuntjak 59). Bhisma's contribution in the form of the energy he exerted and the skill and expertise he utilized for the sake of political detainees and local inhabitants was, in fact, considerable. As a doctor, he worked by curing and healing people who were sick.

Historically, the arrival of political detainees to Buru Island began with the arrival of 850 Group B political prisoners from Java, at the port of Namlea, on

September 4, 1969 (Krisnadi 47). Besides having to survive in the wild, they had to do the obligatory work of opening roads by clearing dense forests and simple equipment. They also cleared agricultural areas and built dams and irrigation channels for the rice fields (49). Bhisma was exiled on Buru Island as part of the group that arrived late in 1971 on the motorboat KM Towuti. Bhisma's friend, Manalisa, calls him "the man from the third wave," with reference to his arrival period (Pamuntjak 58). Bhisma tells Manalisa that he and his friends were banished to Buru without guilt and without understanding the charges against them. For this reason, they did not like to refer to the island as Inrehab (place of rehabilitation); they preferred to call the place of their detention Tefaat (place of *pemanfaatan* or exploitation). In May 1966, the New Order military regime created the three categories of prisoners. The government claimed to possess enough evidence against the prisoners under Group A. Group B prisoners were those merely suspected of being members of the PKI or other banned organizations. They were not tried in the courts for lack of evidence, but they were nevertheless imprisoned until they could prove that they were not members of the PKI or associated groups. In short, they were to be treated as guilty until proven innocent. Group C prisoners were deemed sympathizers of the PKI, for which reason they were to be detained for an indefinite period (Alkatiri 244). In other words, this group was considered guilty by association.

Manalisa is the only friend who knew of Bhisma's whole life on Buru Island, and it is he that relates the stories to Amba, guiding her in the process to know what happened and remember it. Bhisma left in Manalisa's care two bamboo tubes containing letters to Amba he had written but never sent. Both tubes with their contents were finally handed to Amba. The letters contained the story of Bhisma's life from the time of the raid at Universitas Res Publika to his years of banishment on Buru Island. Thus, the human bearer of remembrance (Manalisa) and the written document (the tubes of letters) survive to relate both history and memory of abuse and injustice. The existence and survival of both resist collective forgetfulness, historical revisionism, and official state narratives.

In one of the letters to Amba, dated December 16, 1973, Bhisma tries to record outsiders' perception of Buru Island and compares these impressions with the nuanced reality that they lived through.

Amba,

What passes through people's mind when hearing the words "Buru Island"? I think I know. Armed guards. Brutal people. Killing machines with hollow heads and stone hearts.

But it is not always so. Many friends here believe that we have entered a better period, though some visiting reporters here consider we do not think so. They think we are not able, or refuse, to see the change that brings goodness, though only a little of it. They make notes. They think we are burdened by what has happened before so that we cannot see “the light,” even when it shines in front of us. But I do not think so.... (Pamuntjak 415).

The letter displays Bhisma’s humanity and perseverance despite struggling as an exile for crimes he did not commit. He went through his life as a doctor by giving help to those in need of it, whether they were fellow political detainees, natives of Buru, or the transmigrants. Even after the political detainees were allowed to return home to Java, Bhisma recognized Buru Island’s needs and chose to stay on as a doctor, moving from one place to another. Once, he moved to an area of transmigrants, offering his service to villages in need of medical care. Like Jesus, he healed people, day and night, so that he eventually became known as a *resi*, a holy man (Pamuntjak 32).

In another letter to Amba, Bhisma shares how he got along with the literary writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer. He tells her how very proud he was that he could talk to “Pram” (Pamuntjak 417). While detained on Buru Island for twelve years, Toer wrote the *Bumi Manusia* series, better known in English as the Tetralogy of Buru Island. The series of novels consists of *Bumi Manusia (Earth Man)* (1980), *Anak Semua Bangsa (Children of All Nations)* (1981), *Jejak Langkah (Milestones)* (1985), and *Rumah Kaca (Greenhouse)* (1990), which were all published in succession almost immediately years after Toer was released from Buru Island in 1979. In the New Order Era, the publication and circulation of these novels were overseen by the government (Yusuf et al. 51). By mentioning Bhisma’s meeting with Toer while on Buru Island, Pamuntjak intertextually connects Amba with important Indonesian political and literary history figures, locating historical and fictional characters in a shared social space.

In a letter Bhisma has written for Amba whose exact date is not indicated, only the year, the reader finds an answer to the reason for Bhisma’s exile on Buru Island. The letter is presented in the novel after the meeting and dialogue between Bhisma and Salwa. Salwa was Amba’s fiancé when Bhisma was still serving time at the Salemba detention center, before being transferred to Buru Island. A section of the letter reads:

1977

Amba Beloved,

So much I feel I have written to you, sharing what is there in my heart. But still my heart remains restless. Perhaps the reason is that there are two things you do not know yet and it is the time now for me to write them.

One day, when I was sitting hunched in my cell at Salemba together with those equally not knowing what they had been guilty of doing, Salwa came to me. Later I knew from the prison warden that he had a number of sufficiently powerful acquaintances at Attorney General's Office. (Pamuntjak 456)

The letter reveals something crucial about historical events, and it intimates the complexity of human relationships such as friendship and romance involved in politics. Bhisma was not a member of the PKI, the Sanggar Bumi Tarung, or the Lekra, though he was friends with people from these organizations. His letter to Amba suggests that many people were exiled to Nusakambangan and Buru Island because of the interference or intervention of Salwa, who had powerful acquaintances at Kejaksaan Agung, the central office of Jaksa Agung (or Attorney General, the chief prosecutor) and the institution that determined and classified whether political detainees belonged to Group A, B, and so on. The reader can also deduce from the letter that beneath political entanglements is a love relationship involving Bhisma, Amba, and Salwa, a conflicted relationship alluding to the Mahabharata. The relationship of Amba, Salwa, and Bhisma echoes the love triangle in the Mahabharata. Before meeting Bhisma, Amba was engaged to Salwa. In the novel, it is suggested that Salwa used his friendly and political connections to take revenge against Bhisma.

Ultimately, the novel invites readers to reflect on the complicated relationship between subjective life-stories and political history. Although Salwa failed to marry Amba, and Amba got separated from Bhisma because of the latter's being exiled to Buru Island, Salwa presumably kept track of the whereabouts and the lives of Amba and Bhisma through his friendship with Kejaksaan Agung. Thus, Amba assumed that Salwa sent the anonymous e-mail bearing the news of Bhisma's death and urging Amba to retrace Bhisma's life on Buru Island (Pamuntjak 480). Ultimately, the fate that ties up these three characters turned their love story into a tragic one.

In light of the preceding discussion and from the perspective of new historicism, the Indonesian Communist Party involvement in the Movement of September 30, 1965 can also be interrogated. Who were really involved in the Movement? According to James Luhulima, who makes an effort to view the G30S incident from a perspective markedly different from the government's official version of the historical narrative disseminated during New Order era, there are seven versions of who masterminded the G30S incident. It could have been the Indonesian Communist Party, a clique within the state military itself, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), implying involvement of the US government, a British group in cahoots with the CIA, President Soekarno,<sup>1</sup> Chief of Kostrad (short for Komando Cadangan Strategis Angkatan Darat or Army Strategic Reserve Command), Mayor Jenderal Soeharto, or no one single mastermind but a confluence of forces involving some or most of the parties listed above. John Rossa even goes as far as to say that the motivation or plan behind the The September 30, 1965 Movement remains a mystery (5).<sup>2</sup> Even the only key leader of the September 30, 1965 Movement who escaped the firing squad, Colonel Abdul Latif, refused to explain the September 30, 1965 Movement in detail. When he stood before the court in 1978, he did not take the opportunity to explain the incident (Rossa 7).

If indeed there are many possible explanations for the Movement of September 30, 1965, the publication of *Amba* is a positive action toward understanding these historical events beyond the point of view of official history. Literary scholar Alle G. Hoekema argues, as did I in the foregoing discussion, that Indonesian writers like Mangunwijaya, Sena Gumira Ajidarma, Ayu Utami, Leila Chudori, and Laksmi Pamuntjak have each offered a literary rendering of the trauma of the events surrounding G30S (228). At the same time, as literary scholar Yoseph Yapi Taum further argues, the literature on the September 30, 1965 Movement has not only been concerned with retelling the story of the tragedy. More importantly, they have endeavored to be guardians of the nation's conscience (19).

## CONCLUSION

Through *Amba*, Pamuntjak invites readers to make a pilgrimage to Buru Island and follow the footsteps of ordinary but heroic people, the historical Toers just as much as the fictional Bhismas. The panorama of actual and fictional characters represented in the novel gives life to a range of experiences and motives that cannot be contained in once-for-all conventional and official narratives. And the Buru Island comes alive as a story setting and historical location

where recorded occurrences and personal intentions can be reconsidered. *Amba* pictures thwarted romances, chance meetings, unsent letters, anonymous communication, wrongful accusations, and willful decisions and how these defined the individual lives of exiles who were tragically and justly overtaken by the September 30, 1965 Movement and its aftermath. By living history vicariously through the novel, the reader is made aware that history cannot be grasped or contained by generalizations.

Ultimately, *Amba* helps in recovering aspects or textures of memory that may have already been forgotten in time. After all, we can never have enough memorials for the thousands of political detainees on Buru Island who lost some of the best years of their lives. Many of them did not even understand what wrongs they have committed, if at all. Amarzan Loebis, a former political detainee on Buru Island and now a senior editor of the *Tempo* magazine, endorses the novel (on the blurb) and describes it as a work that mixes imaginary and actual details lovingly and intelligently. He considers *Amba* as a part of “the fight against forgetfulness,” calling attention to the wound in this nation’s history, which has not healed yet.

## NOTES

1. In his book, *JFK vs. Allen Dulles*, Greg Poulgrain claims that Indonesia was an arena of a conflict between the President of the United States and the CIA Director. He claims further, based on interviews, that Suharto may have been involved in the Movement or, at least, knew about the coup plot in advance.
2. A somewhat clearer or at least a better picture of what happened at the time of the G30S incident only began to emerge when the New Order ended and Suharto fell from power. The AURI (Angkatan Udara Republik Indonesia or Indonesian Republic Air Force) and Halim Perdana Kusuma Airport served as the headquarters of G30S. On October 13, 1998 several AURI retirees under the leadership of Air Jr. Admiral (Ret) Sri Mulyono Herlambang held a press conference to express their intention to straighten the perception of many about the history involving their institution (Luhulima 33). The press conference was followed by the publication of the book, *Menyingkap Kabut Halim 1965*, whose title roughly translates to “clearing the mist in Halim in 1965” (Katoppo 9). The book claims that the AURI, as an institution, was not involved in the G30S incident, though it does not deny the involvement of some AURI members (Luhulima 35). Moreover, we learn from the

book that the village of Lubang Buaya, which was used as the central headquarters of G30S, lies outside the area of PAU (Pangkalan Angkatan Udara or Air Force Base Halim Perdana Kusuma). The village has a distance of about one kilometer from the Lubang Buaya dropping zone, the site for parachute training in Halim Perdana Kusuma. Therefore, contrary to long-held assumptions, the PAU Halim Perdana Kusuma was not the central headquarters of G30S (Luhulima 34).

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