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# Orientierungen 36 (2025)

## Inhalt

### Nachrufe

Peter Pantzer (1942–2025) – ein persönlicher Nachruf ( <i>Harald MEYER</i> )	3
Michael Weiers (1937–2025) ( <i>Stefan GEORG</i> )	9
Britta-Maria Gruber (1955–2025) ( <i>Ishayahu LANDA und Ralph KAUZ</i> )	13
Klaus Sagaster (1933–2025) ( <i>Peter SCHWIEGER</i> )	15

### Artikel

<i>Robert F. WITTKAMP</i>	19
How to Commence a Cosmogony: Chinese Encyclopedias, the Making of the <i>Nihon shoki</i> , and Japanese Source Criticism	
<i>Benjamin Jeremias SCHMIDT</i>	55
Die Rolle der Infrajustiz in der Konfliktregulierung des frühneuzeitlichen Japan: Eine exemplarische Untersuchung anhand von Quellen des Dorfes Ōsone	
<i>Dorothee SCHAAB-HANKE</i>	97
Wie weit kam Christian Wolff mit seiner <i>Mengzi</i> -Lektüre? Zu jenem „anderen Philosophen von großem Ruhm“	
<i>Harald MEYER</i>	137
Gesamtdarstellungen und Fragmente der Literaturgeschichte Japans: Ein historischer Rückblick sowie ideen- und geistesgeschichtlicher Ausblick	
<i>Harald MEYER</i>	171
Fragmente der Literaturgeschichte Japans I: Anfänge der Moderne in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts	
<i>Markus BÖTEFÜR</i>	213
Vom Duellanten zum Völkerkundler: Franz Wilhelm Junghuhn auf Sumatra	
<i>Hartmut WALRAVENS</i>	231
Anton Schiefner as Albrecht Weber's Correspondent	

<i>Hartmut WALRAVENS</i> Der Kunsthistoriker Osvald Sirén (1879–1966) in Korrespondenz mit deutschen Kollegen (1930–1949)	239
<i>Michael KNÜPPEL</i> Die Dunganen von Miljanfan	263
<i>Agus R. SARJONO</i> Latest Developments in Indonesian Literature: The Birth of the Essay Poetry Generation	271
<i>Berthold DAMSHÄUSER</i> <i>Angkatan Puisi Esai: A Sui Generis Literary Generation in Indonesia</i>	285

## Übersetzung

<i>Denny JA</i> „Und Minah wurde doch enthauptet“: Ein Essay-Gedicht. Aus dem Indonesischen und mit einer Vorbemerkung von <i>Berthold DAMSHÄUSER</i>	293
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## Rezensionen

Liu Wenqing. <i>Vermischte Gesänge: Eine Studie zu Li Qiaos Gedichtzyklus</i> . Gossenberg: Ostasien, 2025 ( <i>Volker KLÖPSCH</i> )	315
Bei der Lektüre von Liu Wenqings Studie <i>Vermischte Gesänge</i> notiert ( <i>Manfred DAHMER</i> )	322
Nurlan Kenzheakhmet. <i>European-Chinese Imperial Maps and Gazetteers Related to the Kazakh (Qazaq) Khanate and Its Adjacent Regions from the 16th to 19th Centuries</i> . Gossenberg: Ostasien, 2023 ( <i>Hartmut WALRAVENS</i> )	324
Wolfgang Schwentkers. <i>Geschichte Japans</i> . München: C.H. Beck, 2022 ( <i>Markus BÖTEFÜR</i> )	329
Kuwayama Yukiko 桑山裕喜子. <i>Ki (気), Fühlen und Empfinden: Eine linguistische Phänomenologie vorprädikativer Erfahrungsformen</i> . Baden-Baden: Karl Alber, 2023 ( <i>Hendrik GROTH</i> )	331
Sung Un Gang. <i>The Making of Modern Subjects: Public Discourses on Korean Female Spectators in the Early Twentieth Century</i> . Bielefeld: Transcript, 2024 ( <i>Alexandra FUHR</i> )	336
Im Hyug Baeg 임혁백 und KU Jae Hoe 구재회. <i>Mongering North Korean Democracy for Inter-Korean Peace: Democratization in North Korea and Inter-Korean Peace</i> . Seoul: Korea University Press, 2015 ( <i>Lea FEHRENBACH</i> )	339

# Latest Developments in Indonesian Literature: The Birth of the Essay Poetry Generation

Agus R. SARJONO<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Modern Indonesian Literature: An Overview

Modern Indonesian literature, in any case, was born under Western influence beginning with the establishment of *Kantoor voor de Voolkslectuur* (Commission for People's Reading), September, 22, 1917, which later became *Balai Pustaka* (The House of Literature).<sup>2</sup> This institution was founded by the Dutch East Indies colonial government, among other reasons, to combat the so-called "wild reading materials" – literary works that took up themes of resistance against Dutch colonial rule, as well as those centered on romances and popular storytelling.

As a result, a number of literary works – especially novels – were published in formal Malay,<sup>3</sup> generally promoting Western, or rather Dutch, modernity. Yet the works published in this period still represented a mixture: on the one hand adopting Western literary style, and on the other still retaining elements of indigenous forms such as *hikayat* (chronicles) and *syair* (long narrative poems of heroic adventure, somewhat akin to ancient Greek epics).

Several writers, though still publishing through *Balai Pustaka*, sought alternative paths of literary expression: striving for independence from colonial ideology on one side, while discarding remnants of indigenous literary forms and engaging more deeply with Western literature on the other. Their works tended toward the romantic, heavily influenced by Goethe's *Sturm und Drang*. This group called themselves *Pujangga Baru* (The New Literati).

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- 1 Agus R. Sarjono, born in 1962, is a prominent Indonesian writer and literary critic. His poetry books published in Germany are *Frische Knochen aus Banyuwangi* (Edition Galrev, 2002) and *Gestatten, mein Name ist Trübsinn* (regiospectra, 2015). He served as Chairman of the Jakarta Arts Council (2003–2006). In 2013 he received the Sunthorn Phu Award from Thailand for his lifetime achievement.
  - 2 On Balai Pustaka, see Foulcher 1980 and Jedamski 1992. To get acquainted with modern Indonesian literature, see Teeuw 1967; Teeuw 1979.
  - 3 With the founding of the Republic of Indonesia in 1945, the Malay language became the national language of the country under the name *Bahasa Indonesia* (Language of Indonesia). For the dissemination of Indonesian as a lingua franca, while at the same time fostering a sense of nationalism in a country with more than a hundred regional languages, see Adam 1995.

*Pujangga Baru* produced novels and poems that were striking as personal expressions of their authors. Within this movement, two main directions emerged: (1) turning toward the West (particularly Germany), championed by Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana; and (2) turning toward the East (especially Indian mysticism and Islamic Sufism), represented by Sanusi Pane (Indian mysticism) and Amir Hamzah (Islamic Sufism).

Later, these two camps entered into a major debate known as the *Polemik Kebudayaan* (Cultural Polemic). Some voices even proposed a synthesis of West and East, envisioning an Indonesian culture with “the mind of Faust and the soul of Arjuna.”

It was during this period that H.B. Jassin appeared as a literary critic. He formulated the development of modern Indonesian literature in terms of *Angkatan* (generation). From then on, *Angkatan* became an apparatus of literary history. He classified those writers published by *Balai Pustaka* as the *Angkatan Balai Pustaka* (Balai Pustaka Generation), and the later writers publishing in the *Pujangga Baru* magazine as the *Angkatan Pujangga Baru*.

He used this notion of *Angkatan* to proclaim a new generation: the *Angkatan 45* (Generation of 1945), comprising modern Indonesian writers who emerged during the struggle for independence against the Dutch colonial system. Names such as Chairil Anwar, Mochtar Lubis, Idrus, and Pramoedya Ananta Toer, among others, were introduced to the public as representatives of this generation. In schools, literature came to be taught primarily through the framework of these successive generations.

Following the downfall of Sukarno’s presidency and the establishment of Suharto’s regime in 1966, H.B. Jassin announced the emergence of a new literary generation: the *Angkatan 66* (Generation of 1966), with figures such as Taufiq Ismail, Rendra, Goenawan Mohamad, and Subagio Sastrowardjo. *Angkatan 66* also symbolized the victory of *Humanisme Universal*<sup>4</sup> (universal humanism) over *Realisme Sosialis* (Socialist Realism) backed by the Indonesian Communist Party.

Unlike the *Balai Pustaka Generation*, the *Pujangga Baru Generation*, and the *Generation of 1945*, however, the *Generation of 1966* was not formulated on strong aesthetic grounds. Its identity was more political than literary. Nevertheless, in schools, the teaching of literature continued to revolve around *Angkatan*.

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4 Universal Humanism is a literary and cultural movement in Indonesia, introduced by H.B. Jassin in the 1960s, emphasizing human dignity and universal values over ideological or political orientations.

Later, beyond Jassin, the poet Abdul Hadi W.M. proclaimed the *Angkatan 70* (Generation of 1970), and Korrie Layun Rampan introduced the *Angkatan 2000* (Generation of 2000). Neither gained the same recognition as those defined by H.B. Jassin, even though their works and the arguments for their existence were equally valid.<sup>5</sup>

This essay does not aim to involve readers in the details of specific writers or critics. Rather, the outline sketched above serves to illustrate how central and powerful the notion of *Angkatan* has been as a literary apparatus.

Jassin contended that a careful examination of both Indonesian and global literary history reveals a recurring pattern: approximately every fifteen to twenty-five years, a new literary generation emerges. Taking Korrie Layun Rampan's *Generation of 2000* as a reference point, one may ask: which generation arose fifteen or twenty-five years later? Fifteen years after 2000 corresponds to 2015, and twenty-five years to 2025. What literary developments or generational characteristics can be observed in these periods?

## 2 The Birth of Essay Poetry

In 2012, Denny JA published *Atas Nama Cinta* (In the Name of Love), a work that defied conventional literary classification. While it contained poetry, it was not strictly poetic; it resembled short stories or essays, yet was composed in verse; and although it was not an academic treatise, it included footnotes. The author himself designated this innovative form as *Puisi Esai* (Essay Poetry).

Denny Januar Ali, Ph.D., widely known as Denny JA, was born in Palembang on January 4, 1963. He is a prominent Indonesian activist, writer, and political consultant, and the founder of *Lingkaran Survei Indonesia* (Indonesian Survey Circle). In his capacity as a political consultant, he received the "Legend Award" for contributing to victories in five consecutive Indonesian presidential elections following the introduction of direct elections in 2004. This accomplishment established him as the first and only political consultant globally to secure five successive presidential victories.

Denny JA commenced his academic career as Executive Director of Jayabaya University, Jakarta (2000–2003). He also served as a host for political programs on Metro TV and Radio Delta FM (2002–2004) and worked as a columnist for several

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5 To understand the themes and styles of Indonesian poets from the Generation of 1945 to the contemporary 2000s generation, one may consult their works in the German-language anthology Damshäuser and Sarjono 2015.

national newspapers between 1986 and 2005. Subsequently, he founded the Public Opinion Research Association (AROPI, 2007) and the Indonesian Association of Political Consultants (AKPI, 2009). Through these four institutions, Denny JA established a new tradition of public opinion research and political consultancy in Indonesia.

In 2015, the *TIME* magazine recognized Denny JA as one of the “30 Most Influential People on the Internet,” an acknowledgment linked to his 2014 tweet regarding the Indonesian presidential election, which was retweeted over one million times. In the same year, Twitter Inc. awarded him the World’s No. 2 Golden Tweet of 2014 and the No. 1 Golden Tweet in Indonesia. Additionally, in 2014, he was named among the 33 most influential literary figures in Indonesian history by a panel of leading poets, critics, and scholars whose assessments were later published in a comprehensive volume.<sup>6</sup> On August 16, 2018, in collaboration with his institution, the Indonesian Survey Circle (LSI), he organized the largest political education event, which earned a Guinness World Record. In 2020, he was awarded the ASEAN Literature for Humanity and Diplomacy Award by the Sabah Language and Literature Board, Malaysia. He currently serves as Chairman of the Indonesian Writers Association (SATUPENA) and actively promotes interfaith dialogue through the Esoterika Spirituality Forum.

The form of essay poetry emerged from his intellectual restlessness. On one hand, as a researcher and social scientist, he sought to address pressing social issues – particularly the plight of victims of discrimination – grounded in factual data. On the other hand, he felt that his articles in the mass media and academic papers failed to resonate with readers on an emotional level. He experimented with poetry but found that traditional lyric forms were insufficient to convey his themes and objectives. Ultimately, he began composing extended poems featuring plot, conflict, and characterization, supplemented with footnotes citing factual sources. His aim was to engage readers emotionally with the fate of the poem’s characters while simultaneously drawing attention to the social problems underlying their tragic circumstances. This was the form he termed essay poetry.

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6 See Rahman et al. 2014. This volume presents a selection of Indonesian writers, poets, and critics deemed most impactful in shaping the country’s literary history, as determined by a panel of leading scholars and literary practitioners, including Agus R. Sarjono, Jamal D. Rahman, Acep Zamzam Noor, Nenden Lilis Aisyah, Joni Ariadinata, Ahmad Gaus, and the German scholar Berthold Damshäuser. The book became widely discussed and sparked considerable debate within the Indonesian literary landscape.

His book *Atas Nama Cinta*<sup>7</sup> comprises five works of essay poetry:

- 1 *Sapu Tangan Fang Yin* (The Handkerchief of Fang Yin),<sup>8</sup> which addresses racial violence against the Chinese minority during the early Reformasi years<sup>9</sup> in Indonesia.
- 2 *Romi and Yuli dari Cikeusik* (Romi and Yuli from Cikeusik), portraying the persecution of the Ahmadiyah minority.
- 3 *Minah Tetap Dipancung*<sup>10</sup> (Minah Must Still Be Executed), recounting the story of an Indonesian domestic worker in Saudi Arabia who killed her employer after being raped.
- 4 *Cinta Terlarang Batman dan Robin* (The Forbidden Love of Batman and Robin), exploring a same-sex relationship in which one partner comes from a *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) background.
- 5 *Bunga Kering Perpisahan* (The Withered Flower of Farewell), depicting the dilemmas inherent in an interfaith love story.

Its focus on social issues – such as discrimination, violence, and marginalization – distinguishes essay poetry as deeply engaged with contemporary realities. Yet, unlike political pamphlets or journalistic reports, it achieves emotional resonance through character-driven narratives rendered in verse. Footnotes, uncommon in poetry, further reinforce its grounding in factual reality, reminding readers that beneath the fictionalized account lies genuine human suffering.

Consequently, essay poetry can be regarded not only as an innovation in literary form but also as a redefinition of the social role of literature in Indonesia. It invites readers to feel and to reflect, to imagine and to confront, functioning simultaneously as aesthetic creation and social intervention.

An examination of essay poems produced in each of these periods indicates that the Essay Poetry Generation has convincingly emerged, for several reasons:

- *Genre and Form.* In terms of form, all essay poems fundamentally share intrinsic characteristics – relatively long length, narrative style, inclusion of footnotes, frequent use of rhyme, and so forth. Despite this formal commonality, the gen-

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7 For a translation into English, see: Denny JA. *In the Name of Love*. Jakarta: CBI, <sup>1</sup>2019.

8 For a translation into German by Berthold Damshäuser, see: [indonesienlesen.com/2025/11/21/denny-ja-das-taschentuch-der-fang-yin](http://indonesienlesen.com/2025/11/21/denny-ja-das-taschentuch-der-fang-yin).

9 The term „Reformasi era“ (Reform era) denotes the years of reform that began with Suharto’s resignation on 21 May 1998. [Editor’s Note]

10 See the German translation of this poem in this issue of *Orientierungen*.



re allows for virtually unlimited diversity in aesthetic accomplishment and the distinctive voice of each individual writer.<sup>11</sup>

- *Theme*. Thematically, essay poems predominantly address issues of anti-discrimination, amplifying the voices of the voiceless and those marginalized in official histories. To date, the thematic diversity and richness of essay poetry have been considerable, encompassing numerous subjects that had previously received little or no attention in Indonesian literature.
- *Narratology*. Essay poetry is composed by using narrative techniques, incorporating characters, conflict, dramatic structure, and a form of climax – whether following Aristotelian dramatic principles or the narrative frameworks of Todorov, Joseph Campbell, and others.
- *The Presence of Footnotes*. Footnotes constitute both a distinctive and essential feature of essay poetry. They function as factual anchors for the fictionalized narrative, while simultaneously serving as “the other voice” or a contrapuntal element within the poem’s construction.<sup>12</sup>
- *Born of a Major Moment and Collective Memory*. Essay poetry emerged from the great historical moment of the Indonesian Reformasi era, with all its hopes and its discriminatory excesses.
- *An Alternative to Official Narratives*. Essay poetry was born as an alternative to – and a challenge against – official narratives and historiography.
- *Opening Space for Non-Poets*. Essay poetry opens the widest possible space for those outside the traditional circle of poets to participate. Academics, professionals, activists, and politicians – those who might never have imagined themselves writing poetry – have found themselves able to produce essay poetry with ease.<sup>13</sup>

Taken together, these considerations amply justify the recognition of the emergence of the Essay Poetry Generation. Accordingly, the Essay Poetry Generation may be welcomed as a new movement within Indonesian literature.

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11 The structural characteristics of essay poetry may be compared to a jazz standard, in which the same composition is interpreted distinctively by different performers, or even by the same performer in varying contexts. While guided by “standard” conventions, essay poetry permits considerable individuality in expression. See Sarjono and Denny JA 2023.

12 On footnotes, see the articles by Denny JA, Berthold Damshäuser and Agus R. Sarjono in *Jurnal Kritik* 2021.

13 Without essay poetry, it is difficult to imagine figures such as Elza Peldi Taher, Novrian-toni Kahar, Anick HT, or Satrio Arismunandar (all of them activists and journalists), for instance, ever writing or publishing a book of poetry in their lifetime.

### 3 Memory, Forgetting, and Essay Poetry

In literature, memory has consistently served as a vital and abundant source of inspiration. Yet memory faces an ever-present adversary: forgetting and neglecting. This is particularly salient today, when the prevailing injunction in many contexts is to “move on.” Societies are encouraged to progress continuously, to relinquish the past, and to accept the present as it stands. Indeed, the politics of forgetting and moving on frequently form part of governmental agendas, regardless of context or location.<sup>14</sup>

James Gordon Brown, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 2007 to 2010, for instance, during a visit to Tanzania, urged the public to refrain from dwelling on British colonialism and to focus on the future. As reported by the Daily Mail, he stated: “I made it clear to people during my visit to Africa that the days of Britain apologizing for its colonial history are over. We must move forward.”<sup>15</sup>

Responding to such attitudes, Abdulrazak Gurnah, novelist from Tanzania who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2021, contended that the act of writing itself constitutes a form of resistance against distortions of narratives that seek to justify falsehood and injustice, thereby diverting attention from what should be the proper focus of our reflection. In a lecture at Yale University, he elaborated that writing is not solely concerned with lofty ideals or heroic deeds, nor is it merely about combating tyranny or advancing a grand design through fiery rhetoric intended to mobilize the masses. Rather, writing is intimately tied to everyday life: it sustains what is important – how people conceive of themselves, and how they perceive and articulate the world in which they live.<sup>16</sup>

Across Indonesia, as across Southeast Asia, countless memories exist – both anchored and dispersed. They originate from childhood folktales and legends, from experiences spanning youth to adulthood, and from what is heard, read, witnessed, or endured. Collectively, they form a web of memory that binds and shapes our perceptions of life.

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14 It is true that Indonesia’s first President, Sukarno, once proclaimed “*jas merah*” (an acronym for *jangan melupakan sejarah* – “never forget history”). Yet, with or without reference to George Santayana’s famous dictum on the subject, history has repeatedly demonstrated that it is often forgotten.

15 This statement appears in various forms but with similar meaning: “The days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over.” See, for instance: [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-334208/Its-time-celebrate-Empire-says-Brown.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-334208/Its-time-celebrate-Empire-says-Brown.html). See also Rothermund 2011.

16 See Gurnah 2023.

Similar to Gordon Brown, governments worldwide encourage their citizens to forget the past and focus on the future. “Let bygones be bygones.” Yet what choice do societies truly have? Typically none – if they are to secure their future, they must, willingly or unwillingly, accept the maxim: let the past remain past, and let us move forward.

Writers, however, possess a choice. They may decide not to allow what they know and remember to vanish unrecorded into oblivion.

The struggle over memory is never facile. In his long poem “The Schooner *Flight*”, Derek Walcott, portraying the diversity of the Caribbean, declared: “Either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.” After decades of writing, Edward Said confessed: “To this day, I still feel that the distance from home is so very great.” To be nobody, somebody, or even a nation entails nothing less than a struggle of memory against neglect and erasure. The distance between self and home lamented by Said precisely reflects the gap between the present and the memory of origins, between the span of wandering and the soil of return.

From its inception, essay poetry has been closely aligned with the work of preserving memory and bearing witness – performing, in the words of Abdulrazak Gurnah, a form of resistance against the distortions of narratives that justify falsehood and injustice, diverting attention from what ought to remain central in our consciousness.

The first book of essay poetry by its originator, Denny JA, stands as a testimony to five social wounds rooted in discrimination and racism.<sup>17</sup> This same impulse guided Ahmad Gaus in authoring the second book of essay poetry, *Kutunggu Engkau di Cisadane* (I Will Wait by the Cisadane River). A similar commitment is evident in Elza Peldi Taher’s collection of essay poems, as well as in subsequent works by Anick HT, Novriantoni Kahar, Rama Prabu, and others.

The winners of the inaugural Essay Poetry Competition, though drawn from diverse backgrounds, all engaged with a shared concern: the preservation of memory, whether recent, distant, or long past. Peri Sandi memorialized the dark case of Sengkon and Karta<sup>18</sup> during the New Order, safeguarding it from oblivion. Beni Setia captured a moment from the twilight of the Mataram-Kingdom era, while Saifur Rahman documented the tax mafia scandal during the Reformasi era. Each

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17 See Mohammad 2025.

18 The dark case of Sengkon and Karta during Indonesia’s New Order (1966–1998) exemplifies the severe political repression, arbitrary detention, and systemic human rights abuses that characterized Suharto’s authoritarian regime. See, e.g., Aspinall 2005.

confronted distortions of justificatory narratives, resisting falsehood and injustice. Similar patterns are observable among the winners of the second competition and among most subsequent essay poetry writers.

Denny JA has consistently continued to produce essay poetry. In 2024, he published a collection entitled *Yang Tercecer di Era Kemerdekaan* (Those Left Behind in the Era of Independence), thereby completing this trilogy of essay poetry:

- *Atas Nama Cinta* (In the Name of Love, 2012), recording various forms of discrimination that persisted even as Indonesia entered the Reformasi era;
- *Jeritan Setelah Kebebasan* (The Outcry After Freedom, 2022), documenting bloody primordial conflicts in Indonesia shortly after the beginning of the Reformasi era, including Muslim–Christian violence in Maluku, Madurese–Dayak clashes in Sampit, anti-Chinese riots in Jakarta, Balinese versus indigenous community conflicts in South Lampung, and the expulsion of the Ahmadiyah community in West Nusa Tenggara; and
- *Yang Tercecer di Era Kemerdekaan* (Those Left Behind in the Era of Independence, 2024), recounting the sufferings of Romusha forced laborers – Indonesians conscripted by Japanese occupiers during World War II – indigenous girls compelled to serve as “comfort women” for Japanese soldiers, and Indonesian women taken as concubines (*nyai*) by Dutch masters.

This trilogy constitutes a significant endeavor to preserve memory. It represents an act of resistance against the distortions of justificatory narratives, against falsehood and injustice – compelling us to remember, rather than be distracted from, what must remain a vital component of our national life and historical consciousness.

#### 4 A Sui Generis Generation in Four Books

Various works of Essay Poetry, from its inception to the most recent, have been selected and published in the book series *Angkatan Puisi Esai* (Essay Poetry Generation).<sup>19</sup> The series comprises:

The first volume, *Angkatan Puisi Esai I: Kelahiran dan Masa-masa Awal 2012–2014* (The Essay Poetry Generation I: Birth and Early Years), documents essay poetry produced between 2012 and 2014. It opens with Denny JA’s collection of essay poems, followed by contributions from Ahmad Gaus and others. Writers of this inaugural generation published their works in anthologies, each containing five essay poems that explore diverse themes, particularly those rooted in anti-discrimination.

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19 Sarjono et al. 2024.

Nearly simultaneously, two Essay Poetry Writing Competitions were held in 2013 and 2014. The outcomes of these competitions enriched both the stylistic and aesthetic dimensions of essay poetry, forming what may be described as an “aesthetic circle” of the genre. Poems from this period were selected and edited by Ahmad Gaus AF and Irsyad Mohammad; Ahmad Gaus authored the preface, while Irsyad Mohammad contributed the afterword, offering reflections on the panorama of essay poetry during 2012–2014.

The second volume, *Angkatan Puisi Esai II: Menuju Indonesia* (The Essay Poetry Generation II: Toward Indonesia), chronicles essay poetry from 2015 to 2019. Most poems from this period were collected in anthologies featuring poets, short story writers, novelists, activists, and other literary practitioners. The phenomenon had, in fact, begun in 2014 with Fatin Hamama’s bold initiative to invite no fewer than thirty of Indonesia’s “renowned poets,” generating considerable attention, particularly on social media. While some writers remained cautious, many others contributed and continued producing new essay poems. This period culminated in a nationwide movement, involving writers from all thirty-four provinces, who articulated regional anxieties, hopes, and social complexities through essay poetry. Poems were selected and edited by short story writer Joni Ariadinata and journalist Jonminofri; Joni Ariadinata authored the preface, while Jonminofri wrote the afterword, providing a comprehensive overview of essay poetry in 2015–2019.

The third volume, *Angkatan Puisi Esai III: Menuju Manca Negara* (The Essay Poetry Generation III: Toward the International Stage), records the phenomenon of essay poetry from 2020 to 2024. Beyond Indonesia, essay poetry spread rapidly to neighboring countries, especially Sabah. The ASEAN Essay Poetry Community was established, with Datuk Jasni Matlani as president and Fatin Hamama as secretary-general. Datuk Jasni – a Malaysian poet, short story writer, and essayist – also led both the Institute of Language and Literature of Sabah and the Institute of Language and Literature of Malaysia. He initiated the Essay Poetry Festival in Kinabalu, inviting writers and literary scholars from Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Thailand, and beyond, and founded the ASEAN-wide Essay Poetry Writing Competition. Essay poems from neighboring countries displayed diverse forms and aesthetics: some resembled those of the early Indonesian generation, while others were shorter and included only one or two footnotes. Poems from this period were selected and edited by German intellectual, Indonesianist, and essayist Berthold Damshäuser together with poet and short story writer Mahwi Air Tawar; Mahwi Air Tawar authored the preface, and Berthold Damshäuser wrote the afterword, sketching the panorama of essay poetry in 2020–2024.

The fourth volume, *Angkatan Puisi Esai IV: Dalam Kritik dan Esai* (The Essay Poetry Generation IV: Essay Poetry in Criticism and Essays), compiles critiques, studies, and discussions on essay poetry spanning 2012–2024. Various writings – ranging from reviews of particular essay poetry books to analyses of the essay poetry phenomenon more broadly – were collected, selected, and edited by Ipit Saefidier Dimiyati and Imam Qalyubi. The editors organized the essays into chapters such as: Denny JA dan Puisi Esai (Denny JA and Essay Poetry), Puisi Esai: Apa, Mengapa, Bagaimana (Essay Poetry: What, Why, and How), Puisi Esai dan Sastra Terlibat (Essay Poetry and Engaged Literature), Puisi Esai dan Religiusitas (Essay Poetry and Religiosity), Menimbang Puisi Esai (Weighing Essay Poetry), Puisi Esai, Gerakan Sastra, dan Diplomasi Budaya (Essay Poetry, Literary Movements, and Cultural Diplomacy), and Puisi Esai dalam Kritik dan Esai (Essay Poetry in the Embrace of the Essay). Ipit Saefidier Dimiyati wrote the introduction on the critical discourse and scholarship surrounding essay poetry in 2012–2024, while Imam Qalyubi provided the afterword.

Thus stands the entirety of the Essay Poetry Generation – a movement which, according to Berthold Damshäuser<sup>20</sup> is truly *a sui generis generation*: unique and incomparable, even by international and historical standards. For up to this point, it seems that no literary generation or movement in world literature has ever been named after a literary genre itself. And in the Indonesian context, this is the first time that a literary movement has developed into a “generation” capable of transcending national boundaries, reaching Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Thailand, Myanmar, Egypt, Singapore, Australia, and the Solomon Islands.

The Essay Poetry Generation represents a singular literary phenomenon both within Indonesia and beyond. Emerging in 2012, it has developed through four major phases: its birth and early years (2012–2014), the consolidation of its national presence (2015–2019), its expansion into neighboring countries and the international arena (2020–2024), and the accumulation of critical responses and scholarly engagement. The movement distinguishes itself through a set of defining features: a narrative poetic form enriched by footnotes, thematic commitments to anti-discrimination and marginalized voices, and its grounding in the collective memory of Indonesia’s Reformasi era. It further stands out as a literary formation that invites participation not only from established poets but also from academics, activists, professionals, and political figures.

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20 Damshäuser 2024; for a revised English version, see Damshäuser 2025.

While its long-term place within Indonesian and world literature remains to be determined, the Essay Poetry Generation has already left an indelible mark as both a literary experiment and a cultural movement – broadening the horizons of what poetry can achieve and amplifying voices that might otherwise remain unheard.

## 5 Epilog: Essay Poetry, Artificial Intelligence, and Becoming a Poet

The Essay Poetry movement adopted the motto *yang bukan penyair boleh ambil bagian* (even non-poets may take part). This motto functions as a playful inversion of the famous dictum by poet Chairil Anwar, *yang bukan penyair tidak ambil bagian* (non-poets shall not take part). At first glance, the two mottos appear diametrically opposed; yet, they may also be understood as complementary. Chairil's dictum addresses the existential anguish inherent in the act of poetic creation, in which non-poets have no share. The motto of Essay Poetry, by contrast, emphasizes social suffering, in which both poets and non-poets alike are called to participate.

Through the form of essay poetry, individuals who are not traditionally considered poets – professionals, academics, politicians, soldiers, laborers, homemakers, in short, anyone – may engage in writing poetry. Unlike the discipline required of poets, what is needed above all is experience and/or sensitivity to social suffering; with that alone, one can immediately begin producing essay poetry.

But what of the technical aspects of poetry, such as metaphor, rhyme, meter, and dramatic structure?

Unlike the earliest generation of essay poetry writers, who labored intensively to craft poetry without formal mastery of its technical dimensions, today's essay poetry writers may make use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Those moved or inspired by social suffering can “collaborate” with AI to produce essay poetry. Indeed, several anthologies of AI-assisted essay poetry have already been published.

Thus, two camps of essay poetry writers have emerged: one that resists AI intervention, and another that embraces it eagerly. Time will determine which approach endures within the movement and the broader Essay Poetry Generation.

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