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The Medan Novel: an introduction essay

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The Secret Document

a detective story by
D.I. Loebis

Translated by Mary S. Zurbuchen

with an introduction by Koko Hendri Lubis
and an essay on the Medan Novel by Suryadi



Jakarta, Indonesia

The Secret Document

by D.I. Loebis

First published in Indonesian under the title *Document Rahsia*

by Penerbit Antara of Medan in 1941

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The Lontar Foundation has been unable to locate the legal

heirs of D.I. Loebis. For that, Lontar extends its sincere

apologies. Should anyone know of their whereabouts, please

send information to contact@lontar.org.

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The Medan Novel^{*)}

The “Medan Novel”

Roman Medan or the “Medan novel” is a term used to describe a corpus of popular Indonesian literature that was published primarily in the city of Medan, North Sumatra, between the late 1920s and the late 1960s. The publishers of *roman Medan* themselves referred to this genre as “*madjallah roman populer*” because, as indicated by the word “*madjallah*” (magazine), these novels were sold, like magazines, on a subscription basis.

Unfortunately, only a scant amount of research has been devoted to these popular novels, and to this day there is no annotated bibliography of the genre. Koko Hendri Lubis’s 2018 publication, *Roman Medan: Sebuah Kota Membangun Harapan* (The Medan Novel: A City Building Hope) represents an important first step in addressing this inequity. This publication, *The Secret Document*, containing as it does both the novel’s original text

*) This essay is based on a lengthy article by Suryadi titled “*Roman Medan: The Nature and Sociopolitical Context of a Corpus in Sumatran Popular Literature 1930s-1960s*” that was published in *Malay Literature* in 2019 (Vol. 32, edition 2, pages 207-238). The Lontar Foundation is grateful to both the author and *Malay Literature* for permission to shorten and revise that article for a non-specialist audience.

and its translation (as well as an introduction and this essay), is a second step towards the goal of heightening appreciation of the Medan novel and the role it played in the promotion of literacy in Indonesia.

Cultural Politics and Modernity

For a greater understanding of the historical context of the Medan novel and the socio-cultural and political impact this genre effected, one must be aware of two significant factors, shortened here as “cultural politics” and “modernity.” In regard to the first, European colonialism of the rest of the world in centuries past must be seen not just as a conquest through military force but through use of cultural strategies as well. The successful annexation of the vast Indonesian archipelago by the tiny Dutch kingdom of the Netherlands was due not only to military superiority but also to the colonizers’ study of the culture and character of indigenous populations for use in colonial policies.

In 1908, the Dutch colonial administration in Batavia established the *Commissie voor de Inlandsche School en Volkslectuur*. More popularly known by its Malay name, *Balai Poestaka*, the commission’s aim was to publish books in Malay and several other languages for dissemination among Indonesians as a means of realizing the colonial government’s “ethical-political” policies, including education of the local populace, which the Dutch very belatedly began to implement in 1901. That the *Balai Poestaka* was established for the dissemination of work in Malay (and other local languages) and not Dutch, was intentional. The colonial government rightly understood that an enlightened local populace who could argue with them and challenge them in their

own language would pose a threat to their political standing. As language is a key to power and with Dutch being the language of governance, the Dutch language was one key the colonial powers preferred to keep to themselves.

After its establishment, *Balai Poestaka* served as the colony’s cultural or moral “police force.” All books that *Balai Poestaka* published had to meet certain cultural and moral standards, ones that were set by and accorded with the taste of the colonial rulers. For this reason, *Balai Poestaka* did not, for instance, publish any texts that were critical of the colonial government. Among the growing population of educated Indonesians, this policy rankled and led to the establishment of independent publishing ventures outside the single track provided by *Balai Poestaka*. Thus, the emergence of the Medan novel must be seen as an antithesis to the domination and control that *Balai Poestaka* exercised over local languages and cultures, a position that aligns with the argument that popular culture plays an important role in shaping anti-hegemonic views (such as anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism) while at the same time shaping feelings of nationalism. The reaction to *Balai Poestaka*’s policies, as expressed in the publication of *roman Medan*, served to increase the activity of local publishers and printers, which resulted in the publication of popular novels that helped to spread literacy to a larger segment of the local populace than was ever reached by *Balai Poestaka*.

As to “modernity,” the second factor mentioned above, the Industrial Revolution that took place in Europe in the nineteenth century also served to change the face of colonies in Asia. Old towns grew and new ones - built to produce raw material for factories in Europe - mushroomed in areas related to agricultural

industry (tobacco, rubber, sugar cane, etc.). The products of this European technology flowed back to the colonies, creating “modern” cities that formed an urban culture marked by two important elements: the spread of print literacy among the local populace, and the growth of a popular culture expressed in art, music, film, performing arts, popular literature, and the like.

Medan in the Early Twentieth Century

The emergence of the Medan novel is inseparable from the rapid development of the city of Medan at the beginning of the twentieth century following the establishment of the tobacco plantation industry in the region of Deli. The social interaction that took place in the city at that time with the arrival of migrants from a host of nations created a social dynamic unique to Medan. This was reflected in many writings and literary works from that period, chief among them the novels *Rubber* by M.H. Székely-Lulofs and *Merantau ke Deli* (Working in Deli) by Hamka. In a visit to Medan in 1926, the journalist Parada Harahap noted how populous, developed, and glamorous the city was. Cinemas, cafés, and shops in the Kesawan business district were evidence of the modernity and worldliness of Medan’s inhabitants. It was a common sight to see men and women dressed to the nines going to the city’s cinemas - Empire Bioscope, Oranje Bioscoop, and Royal Bioscope - to watch films or *bangsawan* opera performances. Through the cinema’s screens and stages, Medan’s inhabitants absorbed the popular culture of Europe and America.

The heterogeneity of Medan’s inhabitants made this city develop quickly into a place with international flair. This was one of the important elements that the Malay cultural expert Wan

Abdul Kadir Wan Yusoff called “the popular culture of the urban community (*budaya populer dalam masyarakat bandaran*).”

The glamour and modernity of Medan at the time was attractively reflected in a number of *roman Medan*, such as in Emnast’s *Medan Diwaktue Malam* (Medan by Night) and A. Damhoeri’s *Zender NIROM* (The East Indies Radio Transmitter). Several other *roman Medan* depict the stories of young lovers and love affairs between men and women that could have been a reflection of the contemporary social life of Medan.

Medan Novel Series

Six series of *roman Medan*, together containing dozens of novels, have thus far been identified. The earliest is *Doenia Pengalaman* (World of Experience) which first began to appear in 1938 and advertised itself as a “popular detective novel magazine (*madjallah roman detective popoeler*).” The publisher of this series was Penerbit Poestaka Islam, which also published Islamic-themed books and magazines, including an illustrated magazine titled *Poernama* (Full Moon).

The second series, *Loekisan Poedjangga* (Writers’ Paintings), first appeared in 1939 and was published monthly by Penerbit Tjerdas in Medan and Tebing Tinggi. In Medan, Penerbit Tjerdas, which also had its own bookshop, was located on Kapiteinsweg (now Jalan Pandu). Several editions of the *Loekisan Poedjangga* series were also published by Penerbit & Boekhandel Penyiaran in Sigli and Langsa. This series appears to have been published twice, first in 1939 and then in 1944, when a series with the same name appeared. If this is the case, then *Loekisan Poedjangga* is the most long-running series of the six.

The series titled *Tjendrawasih* (Bird of Paradise) first began to appear in early 1940. The first numbered edition was by Matu Mona, entitled *T. Hoofdred Bertindak*, (The Editor-in-Chief takes Action) followed by *Spionnage di Azia Timoer* (Espionage in East Asia) by Hassan Noel Arifin. This series was published by Penerbit Tjendrawasih whose offices were on Luitenantweg (now Jalan Bandung). Little information about this series is available. It appears that the series had limited longevity as extant editions are hard to come by.

The *Suasana Baru* (New Atmosphere) series first appeared in 1948. Headquartered on Djalan Sutomo in Medan, the series was published twice monthly and went through several printers, such as Sjarikat Tapanuli and Saiful. This series had representatives or agents in Kalimantan and Sulawesi and in Malaya as well.

The *Gelora* (Turbulence) series first began to appear in April 1955 with the publication of *Angan2 dan Peristiwa* (Aspirations and Events) by Narmin Suti. The *Gelora* series was published once a month. Its headquarters was located on Jalan Kapten in Medan. This series was published by Penerbit Saiful. Very little is known about this series because few of its numbered editions are to be found in major libraries around the world. Very possibly, this series was a predecessor to the *Menara* series that was published five years later.

The sixth and final series, *Menara* (Tower) first began to appear on 5 June 1960 and lasted for over eight years. Its headquarters was on Jalan Nilam in Medan. The *Menara* series was published by Penerbit Saiful.

Not all titles of the popular novels that were published in Medan are recorded in these six series, one of them being *Document*

Rahsia, presented here in English as *The Secret Document*, by D.I. (Djundjung Ibrahim) Loebis, which was released by Penerbit Antara in or around May or June 1941. (On the inside cover, it's mentioned that this was eighth title to have been published by Penerbit Antara, but the previous seven titles are not listed.) As far as can be ascertained, the very first independent title was published in 1928, that being *Dokter Sjamsoe* (Doctor Sjamsoe), a work by the journalist and writer, Hassan Noel Arifin. Several titles by the prolific author Matu Mona, including his best-known work, *Rol Pacar Merah Indonesia cs* (The Role of Indonesia's Pacar Merah and Friends), were also published independently.

Series Format

Roman Medan were published in pocketbook format, with about eighty to a hundred pages (equivalent to approximately thirty or forty pages if retyped and printed on regular sized printing paper). Each title contains a serial number, publication date, and year of publication. On the whole, each numbered edition contains one title, though there are some that have more than one. This was due to "unexpected obstacles" (*halangan jang menimpa dengan tidak disangka-sangka*) which resulted in some titles being released later than their scheduled date. Among reasons given were shortages of paper, breakdowns of printing machines and editorial problems.

The book covers, most of them in color, feature a sketch done by the series' illustrator. Many editions were also enriched with illustrations that were meant to elucidate the message of the text for the readers. The style of the cover and text illustrations is generally realistic.

The first and last pages of each numbered edition contain various items of information that are of value to researchers, such as the titles in the next numbered editions of the series, brief summaries of the stories, an editorial note concerning subscription, information about the writer, related editorial matters, and advertisements of books and magazines from the same publisher or even other publishers. For example, the editors of the *Suasana Baru* series charged a fee of 50 gulden for a full-page advertisement and 25 gulden for a half-page one.

Authors

The authors of *roman Medan* came from different regions, ethnic groups, and religious backgrounds. This variety in the background of the authors of *roman Medan* was like an indirect union of the multi-ethnic Indonesians in opposition to the domination of the “centre of excellence” of Batavia (the colonial power), which controlled everything, including tastes in art and cultural values.

From the first and final pages of many numbered editions, it can be gleaned that Medan novel authors came from Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, Bali, and Sulawesi. For example, D. Kusuma and M. Dimiyati were Javanese. Merayu Sukma (whose real name was Sulaiman Hassan) and Narmin Suti were from Kalimantan. Taulu H.M. was from Minahasa (Tomohon), North Sulawesi. I Made Otar and Putu Shanti were Balinese.

The most prominent authors were ethnic-Minangkabau from West Sumatra, such as Hamka, Joesoef Sou’yb, S. Djarens, Taher Samad, A. Damhoeri and Saiful U.A. After this came authors from the Batak region of Tapanuli, North Sumatra, such as D.I.

Loebis, Matu Mona, Alinoedin Loebis, and H.M. Hanafiah Lubis. Many of them briefly migrated to Medan or made this city their domicile.

In all, more than ninety Medan novel authors have thus far been successfully identified, but the frequent use of pen names or pseudonyms makes the task of identification sometimes difficult. “Aria Diningrat,” “Swan Pen,” “Merayu Sukma,” “Si Oema,” “Djauhari Kelana,” “Surapati,” “Asmara Suchi,” “Zalecha,” and “Rapez” are all pen names, and the real names of most of these authors have yet to be ascertained.

There were two reasons behind the frequent use of pen names. The first was to avoid potential prosecution by the colonial administrators of the Dutch East Indies under laws that curbed press freedom, because many of these authors were also journalists and extremely critical of the Dutch. Adinegoro, Indonesian press pioneer, stated that at the time “a journalist should not merely be a journalist but should be a writer as well” (*seorang wartawan jangan hendaknya menjadi wartawan thok, tapi mesti menjadi pengarang juga*). Hamka, Emnast, Joesoef Sou’yb and Tamar Djaja were authors who were also great journalists in their time.

The second reason was that, in a time when people had misgivings about criticizing others, literary work allowed veiled social and political criticism. Therefore, those who were critical tried to conceal themselves behind pseudonyms because, at times, they criticized their own friends or colleagues. That said, it was often possible to discern the identity of the person behind the pen name by looking at the writing style.

Publishers and Printers

Roman Medan were published and printed by local publishers whose names include Tjerdas, Poestaka Islam, Poestaka Alhambra, Penerbit Sjaiful, Zamrud, Antara, Centrale Courant & Boekhandel, Sjarikat Tapanoeli, Tjermin Hidoep, Pustaka Nasional, Pustaka Andalas, and National Book Store. The printers were not responsible for the content. There was another publisher and bookstore, Boet Singh, which appears to have been owned by Indian immigrants. Several other publishers also had their own bookstores and were printers as well, such as Tjerdas, which had branches in Bukittinggi and Jakarta, and Poestaka Islam. At the time, publishing in the vernacular language flourished in Medan. Publishers such as Poestaka Islam and Tjerdas also published other books apart from *roman Medan* (the *Loekisan Poedjangga* series).

Printing always involved illustrators (*ahli gambar* or *staf tekenaar*). This can be discerned from the fact that their names were always included in the list of editorial staff of a *roman Medan* series. Their job was to prepare the cover and text illustrations for the novels to be published.

The actual dynamic of the publishing world in Medan between the 1920s and 1960s needs further elucidation. The competition and business cooperation between publishers, their relationship with the government, availability of paper and printing presses, and their membership in IKAPI (*Ikatan Penerbit Indonesia*, the Indonesian Publishers Association) are just a few of the issues that remain unclear. The publisher of the *Gelora* series, for example, had an agent in Singapore. More research into the publishing world in Medan is needed for a comprehensive picture of the local reading culture and publishing industry of this city, which indeed

had a wide-ranging socio-cultural and political impact on the population of Sumatra and of Indonesia in general.

Among the issues that affected local publishers in Medan (and other cities) was the shortage of paper supply, which would drive the price up sharply at times, as well as delays by subscribers or buyers of publications in “sending money orders” (*mengirimkan wesel*) to pay for the novels they ordered. This last matter was often mentioned in the opening or closing pages of a *roman Medan*, an indication that the survival of the vernacular publishers at the time very much depended on its consumers.

The exact print runs of these series have not yet been determined, but many numbered editions were reprinted, with many said to have been sold out. According to a publication credited to Atisah and published by the National Language Center (*Pusat Bahasa*), almost 6,000 copies of the *Doenia Pengalaman* series were in circulation, which is a phenomenal number for that time.

Distribution and Marketing

Roman Medan were distributed within and outside the Dutch East Indies. The term “Indonesia” was already in use in the 1930s and the areas referred to as “outside Indonesia” (*loear Indonesia*) were The Straits Settlements and the British East Indies.

The distribution of *roman Medan* was carried out by the hiring or placement of sales agents in a number of cities in Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, Bali, and Sulawesi. The publishers of *roman Medan* aggressively recruited sales agents in various areas. Some were civil servants, others were owners of bookshops or other stores, as well as owners of restaurants or cafeterias. These agents arranged and

controlled the sales of the books ordered in their respective areas. For example, sales agents for the *Doenia Pengalaman* series were found in the towns of various provinces, regencies and districts. In Sumatra, these agents were found in close to thirty cities throughout the island.

In Java, the agents for *Doenia Pengalaman* were located in Surabaya, Yogyakarta, and Cirebon. In Kalimantan, agents were located in Kandangan, Samarinda, Banjarmasin, Amuntai, and Martapura.

Apart from selling through agents, *roman Medan* publishers also sold directly to subscribers and loyal readers, evidence that distribution was both intensive and extensive. Nonetheless, there were challenges. First and foremost was that agents and subscribers were often late in sending payments to the publishers in Medan, which undoubtedly affected the publisher's finances. The second was orders not being delivered, either due to delays in the postal service or because the package was lost in the mail. Printed apologia for these incidents are to be found in a number of titles.

All Medan novel publishers engaged the service of a staff member called a "propagandist" whose task was to recruit sales agents in various provinces. The propagandist was also responsible for channeling and distributing every numbered edition to the agents and to advertise, in various print media, published and forthcoming editions. Prices were prominently displayed. On the inside cover of Loebis's novella, for instance, it is announced that this title and the previous seven titles published cost 0.40 gulden. Meanwhile, the *Doenia Pengalaman* series cost 1 gulden for three months (later raised to 1.5 gulden) and each numbered edition

cost 0.18 gulden.^{*)} Outside Indonesia, the price was 1.75 gulden for three months and 0.20 gulden per numbered edition. The *Tjendrawasih* series cost 0.18 gulden per numbered edition and 1 gulden for three months (six numbered editions). The *Suasana Baru* series retailed at 1.25 gulden for each numbered edition, while a three-month (quarterly) subscription cost 6.50 gulden. The publisher of the *Menara* series set the price for each of its numbered editions at 4 gulden, with an additional 10 percent charge for postage. However, in reality, for all kinds of reasons (usually because of the rising price of paper), the prices of the numbered editions of *roman Medan* were frequently raised.

To attract more readers, Medan novel publishers used several tactics, such as quizzes, whereby readers who emerged as winners would win prizes. Apart from this, agents also received recognition or money from publishers when they successfully sold more books.

Readership

The target readers of *roman Medan* were young people. As the Medan-based journalist Joesoef Sou'yb wrote in a 1938 essay, "A novel spins a tale. The tale will remain a tale, fantasy will remain fantasy. Presented to Indonesia's young men and women. (*Seboeah roman berdjalinakan riwajat. Riwajat akan tinggal riwajat, fantasi akan tinggal fantasi. Disadjikan kepada para pemoeda dan pemoedi Indonesia.*)"

*) Just as a comparison, in 1938, 1.82 gulden was equivalent to 1 U.S. dollar. In 1938, the guilder purchasing power would be approximately equal to 10 U.S. dollars today. An example of such an announcement can be seen in the inner cover of Emnast's *Medan di Waktou Malam*.

The romance novel is often linked to the freer and younger generation of readers. However, there were writers who reminded readers that popular literature, including *roman Medan*, had a moral and religious responsibility. Sjaiful UA, author of *Puteri Kedah* (The Girl from Kedah), a novel in the *Menara* series, wrote that “nurturing moral and religious relations is our joint responsibility (*memelihara hubungan moral dan hubungan agama menjadi tanggung jawab kita bersama*).”

The morals of *roman Medan* were different from those of popular fiction nowadays. They incited feelings of nationalism and contained moral and religious lessons. Many editions also presented the history of Indonesians and the spirit of independence from the Dutch and Japanese, which was a way to inculcate an awareness of history and self-worth in the younger generation, the target readers of this corpus.

Political and Literary Resistance against Batavia

Many *roman Medan* authors were nationalists whose anti-colonial views were couched in fiction. Numerous titles contained nationalistic messages and veiled lessons in resistance against the Dutch colonial power. The Australian scholar Paul Tickell has posited that early Indonesian popular literature was a means by which the “idea of Indonesian nationalist politics enter[ed] into the popular imagination.”

The sometimes political nature of popular literature, including *roman Medan*, can be traced through the fact that several editions were confiscated by the colonial authorities for being deemed to be disruptive to “peace and order” (*rust en orde*). A number of

writers were also arrested and jailed by the colonial police on the same charge. One of those arrested was Matu Mona, who was jailed twice because of writings critical of the Dutch colonial administration. The combined *Suasana Baru* series 9/10 by A.A. Musa, titled *Djiwa Pemuda* (The Spirit of Youth), was confiscated because its stories contained nationalistic elements encouraging young people to stand up against foreign colonialists.

During the Japanese occupation of Indonesia (1942–1945), *roman Medan* were also carefully reviewed by military authorities. Most managed to pass muster because of their obvious criticism of the Dutch. However, several *roman Medan*, such as the titles by Zalecha *Pemuda 4 Masa* (Young Man of Four Ages) and *Gadis 4 Zaman* (Young Woman of Four Time Periods), which contained criticism of the Japanese occupiers, were confiscated by the Japanese.

Popular Novels and the Spread of Literacy

From the above discussion about the readership of *roman Medan*, it is very likely that this genre of popular literature appealed to a different segment of readership than the more “uplifting” books, magazines, and almanacs published by *Balai Poestaka*. The readership of *Balai Poestaka* publications might generally be described as members of the educated indigenous elite who, because of their secular European/Dutch education and/or work within the Dutch East Indies colonial administration, shared a closer affinity to the white (Dutch) ruling class than did, for instance, the readership of *roman Medan*, who were, also generally speaking, not of the same social class. Many were likely

to have been exposed to the reading culture through education at independently-run schools, which were labelled “wild schools” (*sekolah liar*) by the Dutch. Based on the narrative contents of *roman Medan*, it could be argued that the readership of this corpus (and of popular novels as a whole) held views about colonialism that were very distinct from, if not in contention with, those held by the readership of books published by *Balai Poestaka*.

The books published by *Balai Poestaka* were distributed throughout the Dutch East Indies through a mobile library system that was supported by funds from the government. There were hundreds of these mobile libraries, but most were to be found only in major towns and cities, such as Palembang, Medan, Padang and the like. *Roman Medan*, however, through the use of a vast network of agents, reached a much larger readership, even in areas inaccessible to the mobile libraries of *Balai Poestaka*.

Conclusion

To more clearly recognize the important role that the Medan novel played in Indonesian history - but one that has thus far gone largely unrecognized - we need only review several of the most salient points mentioned above.

- ← The emergence of the Medan novel represents an antithesis to the domination exercised by the Batavia-based colonial government through *Balai Poestaka* over local languages and cultures;
- ← Being free from censorship by the colonial authorities, the Medan novel helped to foster such anti-hegemonic views as anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism while fostering feelings of nationalism.

- ← The popularity of the Medan novel increased the activity of independent local publishers and printers which, in turn, resulted in the publication of an ever-growing number of popular novels that helped to spread literacy to a larger segment of the local public than was ever reached by *Balai Poestaka* or the central government.

Finally, publishers of the Medan novel actively sought to bring together writers and intellectuals from throughout the archipelago without regard to ethnicity or religion, which surely contributed to the growth of nationalism. Intrinsically, *roman Medan* had a literary spirit and contained narratives and morals that opposed domination by the “center of excellence” of Batavia, which, as the center of the Dutch colonial government, tried evermore to control and monitor the local populace, economically, politically, and culturally. There are lessons to be learned in this today.

Suryadi

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