

Creative Process in Writing Short Stories of the Indonesian Domestic Workers in Hong Kong

Helvy Tiana Rosa, Ilza Mayuni, Emzir
{helvytiana@unj.ac.id}

Faculty of Arts and Language, Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Indonesia

Abstract. As one of many forms in creative writing, short stories are usually assumed to be written by people who have a certain level of high creativity and intellectual capacity. This research revealed unusual cases in which some Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong have been expressing their thoughts and imagination in the form of short stories and intended to identify and explain their creative process in writing the short stories. Using qualitative research with case study methods, this research found eight reasons and stimulus and found that writing short stories could be done by virtually anyone, including marginalized people, as long as they have enough creative drive and determination to overcome any shortcoming or challenge which may hinder their creative process. A conducive environment and supporting community are also helpful factors.

Keywords: creative process, short story, domestic workers, Hong Kong, literacy, case study.

1 Introduction

Writing, in particular, literary writing, has been long considered as an intellectual work, hence required the writers to have higher education degrees. Many great Indonesian literary writers have their degrees from various academic backgrounds [1]. A lot of them even have master or doctoral degrees.

This view was supported among others by Atherton who argued that the theoretical horizon and its application was very important for the creative writing process and proposed that without theory, the writing class might be at risk of being on the same ground over and over, without any chance to move up to the next level. Writing and creative theory, said Atherton, should be studied simultaneously as they strengthen each other[2].

Antonioua emphasized the importance of reading and learning the experience of other writers. To get the idea for writing or to overcome writer's block, Antonioua suggested the writers watch movies, read, explore the current cultural climate and keep challenging their ideas and beliefs[3].

In her article, Anae argued that the teaching and curricula of creative writing was an established procedural package to deliver an outcome, although the outcome was unpredictable, unknown beforehand, very individualistic, and depended on the genre being used like poetry, short story, or novel [4].

However, in 2005, the view above was challenged. The Indonesian writing scene was caught by surprise when a few Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong started publishing their own literary works in the form of short stories.

Most of them had only graduated from elementary school. Only a few had the luxury of having been educated in junior high school and even less in senior high school. These young women had traveled far away from their villages – most probably for the first time in their lives – to pursue the dream to earn a higher income for their family. They have only limited options available in their birthplaces: helping their parents in their small farms, planting land or fishing areas, working as sweated laborers in the nearby factories, or as domestic workers in nearby cities to get USD 50-150 per month with long, grueling hours or fall into human trafficking syndicates and traded as sexual workers to other cities or countries.

Although Hong Kong has a labor law, by the time this research was conducted, the law had not yet to cover the domestic helpers, hence they did not have any legal protection to earn a minimal salary and benefit from a safe working environment. Many of them suffered from inhumane or even abusive work environments, such as low salaries that could be delayed for months or even years, long working hours sometimes without a break during the weekend or any holiday. Only recently, the authorities of Hong Kong have extended the labor law to protect the domestic helper workers, after some of them were found heavily wounded or dead as the result of long-time domestic violence – a direct violation of basic human rights.

However, despite the lack of higher education, lack of time to read and write, not to mention the presence of unsupportive employers, a few of these domestic workers had successfully managed to write short stories to express their feelings and thoughts. I was invited to deliver a series of writing workshops for them but was caught by surprise when they sent their writings for me to look at. After they did some corrections here and there – not unusual for beginners, I helped to propose and endorse some selected stories to a leading publisher. The rest was history.

No matter how simple, their writings are interesting and important. Their stories served as a window for us to look into their world as domestic workers, a world with its own dynamics, problems, and challenges; brought us closer to their minds and souls; and made us see our world from their point of view. Among them, we could find stories about dreams, struggles, loneliness, fear, relationships, love, achievement, joy, and other human ups and downs. The stories gave the domestic helpers a face, made them human beings just like us, not just nameless numbers, concealed behind the doors.

Hence, the creative process that drove the Indonesian domestic workers to write such stories is equally important. They challenge the long-held assumption that writing should require higher education degrees and needs to be done as an exclusive activity, that it cannot be done while doing long hours of physical work, and also that the writer has to take time to read, research, and write over and over again. Those luxuries were not available for the domestic workers – some of them did not even have writing tools like pen and paper, nevertheless a laptop, and their employers could be unforgiving.

What drove their creativity, and how their creative process really worked are among the subjects of discussion of this paper.

2 Research Methodology and Procedures

This research used qualitative descriptive design, i.e. a process to learn and understand based on the methodology to investigate social phenomena and human problems. With this approach, the researcher developed a complex description, studying the words, detailed reports from the respondents and conducting the study in the natural environment.

To support this, the researcher chose the case study method. Yin defined the case study research as an empirical study to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in real life, in which the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context were not yet clear. Denzin and Lincoln concluded that, in general, the case study method was the personal research method and a review of a unique personal experience [5].

3 Creative Process of the Indonesian Domestic Workers in Hong Kong

There are tens of Indonesian domestic workers who wrote short stories. Some of them were very productive and gained fame among Indonesian migrant workers. A few journalists and writers from Hong Kong also gave these writers and their works attention.

To identify their creative process behind their literary works, I traveled to Hong Kong a few times to conduct interviews with them. They had worked in Hong Kong between 2003 and 2015.

I selected five out of them based on the following criteria:

- a) their short stories had been published as books
- b) they were appreciated by their readers and acknowledged by fellow writers
- c) their works had won competition(s)
- d) they inspired and drove other Indonesian domestic workers to write

The selected respondents were:

- a) Sukamsih Insane (aka Bayu Insani): finished elementary school, married, left her child in Indonesia.
- b) Ida Raihan (did not finish elementary school, not married)
- c) Heni Sundari or known by her pen name: Jaladara (finished senior high school, not married)
- d) Susie Utomo (finished senior high school, married, left her child in Indonesia)
- e) Syifa Aulia (finished senior high school, left her child in Indonesia)

As samples for this paper, I selected only three out of them, namely Sukamsih Insane, Ida Raihan, and Heni Sundari.

2.1 Sukamsih Insane (aka. Bayu Insani)

Bayu was born in a very poor family in a village in the Kebumen regency, Central Java province, in 1981. Married when she was very young, she eventually took an offer to work abroad, leaving behind her child and her family in return of the promise of a big salary and the hope to provide a better future for her family. The recruitment agency flew Bayu to Hong Kong in 2007. It was the first time for her to go outside Indonesia.

Working as a domestic worker, Bayu was expected to work from morning until 9pm local time, with one day off every weekend or equal to four days in a month. Despite having only graduated from elementary school, Bayu loved to read. In 2008, she set up a mobile library called 'Perpustakaan Insani' for the other migrant workers in the popular Victoria Park.

The mobile library ignited Bayu's desire to write. In March 2009, she joined the Forum Lingkar Pena (FLP) Hong Kong, a writers' community founded by two female writers and me

in Indonesia a few years before. FLP conducted weekly writing workshops for its members, where Bayu learned how to write from the very beginning. For the workshop, FLP HK managed to invite well-known Indonesian writers such as Taufiq Ismail, Habiburrahman Elshirazy, Andrea Hirata, Aditya Gumay, Asma Nadia, and some other popular names.

Bayu gradually increased her writing skills, from writing for the bulletin to writing short stories and novels. An Indonesian publisher encouraged her to write her experience about coming to Hong Kong and then becoming a writer despite her job as a domestic worker. Her first book was 'TKW Menulis' (Female Workers Write), published in collaboration with another Indonesian domestic worker, Ida Raihan. In 2010 she started writing scenarios for movies and TV drama after attending a workshop by Aditya Gumay, an Indonesian movie director and scriptwriter.

From 2009 to 2013, Bayu had published about a dozen of books, among which *TKW Menulis* (Leutika), *Emak-emak Facebookers Mencari Cinta*, (Leutika), *Setan 911*, (Leutika), *Cerita Cinta Ibunda* (Mizan), *Selaksa makna Cinta, Lagu Opick Menjadi Inspirasiku*, (Leutika), *Surat Berdarah untuk Presiden, Penjajah di Rumahku, Kepentok Jodoh* (Leutika Pro), *Cinta Monyet Never Forget* (Leutika), *Masihkah Kau Mencintaiku* (Leutika), etc. Her short stories and other writings were published in magazines and newspapers in Hong Kong and Indonesia.

She also won many awards. One award she was very proud of was 'From Zero to Hero Award' from the Leutika publisher. Bayu is now working as movie/TV scriptwriter for Aditya Gumay.

2.2 Heni Sri Sundani (aka. Jaladara)

Heni was the only respondent who graduated from college while she was working as a domestic worker in Hong Kong. Awarded as the best student in her class in Saint Mary's University, Hong Kong, Heni was then chosen as one of the leading figures in South East Asia by Forbes magazine for her social movement works to empower women and children.

Born in 1987 in the Ciamis regency, West Java province, Heni always wanted to be a teacher who could provide free education for children, especially those who were poor. This dream was inspired by her own childhood experience, when she struggled to accomplish her basic education due to the lack of financial ability of her parents. Despite all the hardships, Heni successfully graduated as the best student from her elementary school and her junior high school. Afterward, Heni attended a vocational high school in the nearby city, which required her to move out of her village, and financed herself by selling goods.

Graduating with high scores, Heni rejected the offer to work for a Korean company in Bekasi, West Java. She didn't think the job could bring her closer to achieving her dream of becoming a teacher. Inspired by her Mandarin teacher who worked in Korea to pay for her studies in college, Heni persuaded her reluctant mother to allow her to work in Hong Kong. Four months later, she landed in Hong Kong, mesmerized by the bustling city.

The first year was tough. Heni needed to adjust to a different language and culture as well as to the city which seemed never sleep. Based on the information from a newspaper, she enrolled in a college which offered distance learning in IT and required attendance for face to face meetings only once a week. She needed to work harder because she sent almost all of her salary home, keeping only a fraction for emergency purposes. Afraid of making them angry, she didn't seek approval from her employer.

Later on, she found out that her employer had cheated her for two years, by illegally cutting off HKD.100 every time she took the weekly day off and the public holiday. The day off

was her right as an employee hence it didn't warrant a penalty. This case inspired her to advocate for other female workers to fight for their rights.

After two years, Heni moved to another employer, a family who turned out to be supportive of her goal to finish her college degree. She enrolled to Saint Mary's University and took the Entrepreneur Management program. The Lam family allowed flexible working hours for her to manage the study tasks on time and also allow her to perform her religious duties as a Muslim.

During seven years in Hong Kong, Heni had published 17 books and tens of writings which were published in various media in Hong Kong and Indonesia. She collected 3.000 books which she bought from her savings. One of her writings, 'Surat Berdarah untuk Presiden' (A Bloody Letter for Mr. President) was featured in Ubud Writers and Readers Festival, an international literary festival held in Bali. The writing was translated into English and German for international publication.

She also gave language courses (in Mandarin, English, and German), computer and other lessons to her fellow female workers. She always encouraged them to have big dreams, to make their life meaningful.

Although her degree and Chinese language skills opened up the possibility for Heni to work on a bigger salary in Hong Kong, she decided to go home, to pursue her dream of becoming a teacher. Devastated because almost nothing had changed since she had left her village years ago, Heni decided to build a library in her parents' house. This was the first library in the village, just as she was the first one who got a college degree. Heni got married to a farming engineer from a respected family. She moved to Bogor, worked for an NGO and also worked as a teacher in a private school.

3 Creative Process of the Female Indonesian Domestic Workers in Hong Kong

All of these female Indonesian workers had some characteristics in common: they were honest, open minded, persistent, never gave up, kind, liked to help others, liked to share, imaginative, liked to learn, critical, and dared to step out from their comfort zones.

All of them joined the Forum Lingkar Pena Hong Kong to learn how to write and later on, became part of the organization. They also won writing competitions and had their works published as anthologies or under their own name. Four of five writers used alias names, except Ida Raihan who chose to use her real name.

My research found eight reasons which motivated them to keep on writing, despite all the difficult challenges: (1) to speak out about the misery or injustice around them, (2) to deliver good, moral values, (3) to entertain the readers, (4) to prove to their own self, (5) as therapy (escapism), (6) to get more revenue, (7) to be known or recognized by the community, (8) to fulfill their dreams.

However, they were not without challenges. Here is what I found from the research:

- 1) They were always undermined, considered as not clever enough to write by their employers as well as by the general public.
- 2) They were vulnerable to unpleasant sayings or actions, including physical or sexual abuse, hence they were afraid of their employers. Most of the employers forbade them to write.
- 3) They didn't have enough time to write as their work as domestic helpers required them to be ready almost 24 hours with only one day off in a week.
- 4) Therefore, they were forced to cut down their sleeping time to write, although they were very tired.
- 5) Their employers forbade them to write because it was not part of their job and writing was not suitable for blue collar workers like them.
- 6) Their employers didn't allow them to use a laptop because it consumed electricity in the house.
- 7) Their employers refused to allow them to use home facilities for writing.

Except for Susie Utomo (not featured in this paper), the other four respondents had been more productive when they got a new contract with better, supportive employers. Hence, the following factors played significant roles for their creativity and their productivity:

- 1) The employers appreciated the domestic helper as a professional service and treated them equally.
- 2) The employers paid them at least the minimum wage level as stipulated by the Hong Kong labor law.
- 3) The employers gave them a day off once a week and every public holiday.
- 4) The employers supported their efforts for capacity development, allowed them to write after the working hours, and even encouraged them to take a college degree.
- 5) Hong Kong has a creative atmosphere which allowed the respondents to get inspiration and ideas.
- 6) The public library was free and comfortable and allowed the respondents to pursue their thirst for knowledge, as well as free Wi-Fi access in public areas.
- 7) The presence of writing communities like Forum Lingkar Pena significantly helped them to develop their writing skills and to get community recognition, which was important to boost their spirits and to hone their skills.

Below is the creative process of the respondents before, during, and after the writing activities.

Before writing: (1) reading, (2) recalling memorable experiences, (3) closer observation, (4) walking around, (5) discussing, (6) writing on ideas book.

During the writing process: (1) take a rest as their writing time was taken from their break time, (2) writing while doing other activities like writing on a piece of paper while cooking, writing while waiting for the children of the employers and other empty times, (3) adjusting to developing situations. For them, writing is not about mood, but about using the available time and situation the best they could, (4) watching their surroundings closely, especially when they didn't have a choice but to write in secret.

After writing: (1) rereading, (2) contemplating, (3) editing, (4) revising, (5) publishing.

All of them admitted that mostly they were inspired by facts and realities faced by themselves or by their friends. They added up the imagination element and the writer's perspective to create new fictional stories. Domestic workers always became the central characters of their stories, with Hong Kong as the common background. Hence, the writers took the closest environment to them as the material for their stories.

Digital communication technology also played an important role in the creative process of all writers. Internet enabled them to search almost any information they needed for free and almost instantly. Social media also provided them the opportunity to share their works and get feedback from the readers hence they could make adjustments and corrections as needed. They also had blogs where they put their stories online, searchable and readable from everywhere around the world.

Two short stories i.e. '*Surat Berdarah untuk Presiden*' (Bloody Letter for Mr. President) by Sukamsih Insane (aka. Jaladara) and '*Penjajah di Rumahku*' (Invaders in My House) by Susie Utomo were nationally published, discussed in international literary events such as the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival 2011 and the Hong Kong Literary Festival 2013 and were translated into English and German.

The research concluded that at a certain level, literary writing could be learned by anybody, regardless of the educational background of the writers. Indeed, writing a short story requires a personal creative process, which may differ from one person to another but the process is learnable.

These findings open up the possibility to replicate the creative process as well as the environment to encourage more migrant workers to write down their thoughts and feelings, especially in countries which have a similar working climate to Hong Kong, like Taiwan and Singapore. Forum Lingkar Pena writing community is also present in both these countries.

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