TORTURED BODY, BETRAYED HEART

State Violence in an Indonesian Novel by an Ex-Political Prisoner of the “1965 Affair”

Budiawan
National University of Singapore

Introduction

Within the Baconian perspective, torture is a discourse of “discovery”. Like violence and coercion which are essential for the domination of nature, torture is an appropriate technique in other realms of human inquiry (Dubois, 1994; Hanson, 1998). Therefore, it must not be necessarily practised when the “truth” is already in hand. In practice, the aims of torture, in the sense of an intentional act of inflicting severe pain and suffering on a person for certain purposes (UN Convention, 1984), quite often go beyond the “truth” inquiry. In a regime of control by fear, for instance, the effects of torture upon the (potential) victims are more anticipated than the “truth” the victims to tell.

By exploring an Indonesian novel written by an ex-political prisoner allegedly involved in the “September 30, 1965 Affair” (thereafter, the “1965 affair”), this paper attempts to show the limits of the instrumentalist Baconian perspective of torture. More specifically, by closely reading the narratives of state violence in the novel, this paper tries to explore how and to what extent the power of the regime operates through the effects of torture upon the victims.

The novel discussed here is Merajut Harkat (Knitting [Human] Dignity), written by Putu Oka Sukanta. This is about an ‘obsessive’ struggle of a human being – as represented in the central character of the novel, Mawa – to be human again after he has been extremely dehumanised, as having been imprisoned without knowing what

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2 This refers to the kidnapping and killing of six top Army officers by a regiment of Presidential guards (Cakrabirawa) which then brought about Suharto’s rise to power.

3 He was an author contributing his works to various print media, including the ones managed by “LEKRA” (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat = Institute of People’s Culture, a mass organisation of artists affiliating with PKI). That is why he was charged with being a member of LEKRA, when in fact he was never a member of any organisation. See, Kompas, May 9, 2000.
he is guilty of. This novel is much inspired by the author’s own experiences and observations during his imprisonment without trial from 1966 to 1976. However, it is neither a testimony as such, nor an historical account of the bloody period marking the change from Sukarno’s rule to Suharto’s “New Order” regime – both being types of work which has been ‘booming’ since the fall of Suharto in May 1998. What makes it (slightly) different from the latter is that it constitutes a testimony bound in its own central human theme, by which its narrative is structured. This human theme is to serve as a preservative, so that this work is supposed to ‘transcend’ its historical boundaries, at least as it is understood in the predominant notion of “fiction” vis-à-vis “non-fiction”.

Before exploring the narratives of the state violence in the novel, this paper will firstly overview the “New Order” regime’s official narrative on the “1965 affair” contrasted with narratives by ex-political prisoners accused of having been involved in the “1965 affair”, or eks-tapols as popularly known. It is important to understand how eks-tapols are predominantly represented and representing themselves. These representations in turn shape the ways they signify their experiences of being tortured by the state apparatuses, as the second section will explore. The third one will frame the explorative reading of the novel in a ‘theoretical’ discussion of torture and examine the Baconian perspective. Finally, the conclusion will show some ‘practical’ implications of this explorative reading for a possible discursive agenda to eradicate the use of torture.

**Challenging the Official and Dominant Narrative of the “1965 Affair”**

In the official narrative of Suharto’s “New Order” regime (and the popular discourse of the “1965 affair”), what “really happened” on September 30, 1965 was an abortive Communist coup. The Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) was believed to have masterminded the putsch by the regiment of Presidential guards (Cakrabirawa) who kidnapped and killed six top Army officers, “as a way of controlling the military, before finally controlling the state”, the “White Book” of Suharto’s “New Order”.

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4 These works include Sulami’s autobiography, *Perempuan-Kebenaran dan Penjara* (Jakarta: Yayasan Cipta Lestari, 1999); one testimony of Omar Dhani and Sri Mulyono Herlambang, *Menyingkap Kabut Halim* (Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1999); and A. Latief’s defence, *Suharto Terlibat G 30 S* (Jakarta: ISAI, 2000), etc.

5 This term literally means ex-political prisoner; but in practice it often refers specifically to the ex-political prisoners associated with the “1965 affair”, rather than with any other events.
regime claims. This is based “on the evidence from the trials of the top PKI leaders and those who were involved in the revolt of the September 30, 1965 Movement.”

However, Suharto and the Army in fact began the campaigns to exterminate the PKI and its mass organisations just a few days after the “1965 affair” occurred, while they held the “trials” months or even years later.

Such a version (or accusation?) implies that every member and sympathiser of PKI and its mass organisations must have already known in advance what would happen on September 30, 1965. This is doubtful as they themselves only heard about the “1965 affair” from the radio and other mass media – which had been controlled by the military -- just the following day or even later. Even when the mass media reported that it had been masterminded by the PKI, they did not believe it, as they had never heard of any plan for such a bloody movement by the Party leaders. Even if it did involve the top Party leaders, it does not mean that it involved the PKI as a political organisation.

In other words, they themselves were (and are) confused (and curious) with “what really happened” on the date.

In *Merajut Harkat*, such a confusion is seen in Mawa’s course of life story as a political prisoner without trial. He had heard about the mass arrests and the mass killings of those being charged of having some affiliation with PKI. Yet he had no expectation that he would finally be arrested by the military and a group of civilians, as he was convinced that he had never done anything against the law. As a teacher, he worked at what he was supposed to do; and as an author, he and some of his fellow

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6 *Gerakan 30 September Pemberontakan Partai Komunis Indonesia: Latar Belakang, Aksi dan Penumpasannya* (Jakarta: Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia, 1994). This is called the “Buku Putih” (White Book), or the revised Suharto’s “New Order” official version of the “1965 affair”.

7 A trial of Sudisman, a member of the Central Committee of PKI, for instance, was only held in August 1967; while the Chairman of PKI, Aidit, and the commander of Cakrabirawa, Let. Col. Untung, and the top commander of the Movement, Brigadier Gen. Supardjo, who might have had key information about the “1965 affair”, had already been killed by the Army.

8 All of the respondents – twenty eks-tapols – whom I interviewed during a field research in various areas in Java (October 1999 to early January 2000) share such an opinion, regardless of the degree of their (political) education and political affiliation with PKI. They say that they have not understood why they were imprisoned without trial except that they were the members or sympathisers of PKI or its mass organizations, which were then legal.

9 Some of the respondents say that they are very keen to study every a new account of the “1965 affair”. After the fall of Suharto in May 1998, several alternative versions which were previously circulated in the limited community of academics only – having been officially banned – have been translated into Indonesian and are now easily accessible.
authors managed a literary magazine where those sharing the common ‘ideology’ of authorship could articulate their ideas. Even if he had to acknowledge this part of the accusation, still he did not understand why he was arrested, interrogated, tortured, and detained for an uncertain length of time.

Other tapols in this novel surely shared such an experience. Like Mawa, they too did not understand why they were arrested and imprisoned. Some admitted to their membership in the mass organisations affiliated with PKI. But, “by then becoming a member of a mass organisation was just like joining a football club, without necessarily knowing about PKI”, Mawa said (p. 496). Even if one was a member of a PKI-affiliated mass organisation, “what has been wrong with that?” As one tapol, a member of PR (Pemuda Rakyat = People’s Youth, a mass organisation of PKI) said, “I remain proud of being a member of PR. But, is it wrong? I have never committed any crime. I did not take a part in any activity in Lubang Buaya10; and I know nothing about it. But in the eyes of the rulers, we have to admit that we know everything” (p. 497).

They were confused and wondering about what had really happened. They were puzzled as to what had brought them into the prisons, and what had caused the mass killings in the countryside.11 They articulated various “analyses”. For instance, one tapol said that “it was the fault of Aidit”, the PKI Chairman, “who was too ambitious” (p. 296); while other tapols cursed the Cunning General, “who was a burglar yelling ‘burglary’” (p. 217);12 and some tapols perceived it as an espionage war (p. 465), in which “the extermination of PKI –since (it was) the largest supporter of Sukarno – was just a means of overthrowing Sukarno” (p. 469).13 In any case, they were only individual “analyses”, rather than factual reports. As one tapol said,
“anybody can indeed make any ‘analysis’” (p. 465), and another said, “nobody knows exactly what has really happened” (p. 486).

At any rate, as there had been a powerful judgement that PKI was the mastermind of the murder of the six top Army officers, which then quickly led to the mass hysteria of anti-communism, there was hardly any space left to resist such allegations. What the would-be “New Order” regime did, then, was not to ‘prove’ whether or not one had really been involved in what happened on September 30, 1965, but whether one was a communist or gave an indication of being one. This was the primary motive for torturing the prisoners, which would then have its own various implications for the victims, as the following section will explore.

Torture and its Effects upon the Victims in Merajut Harkat

Torture is always practised in an unbalanced relation of power between the torturer and the person being tortured. As the former is powerful, the latter is powerless. In such a relationship, torture is an embodiment of power with its multiple effects upon both the torturers and the victims. The practice of torture itself not only is enabled by, but is also a demonstration of the power network of the torturer upon the person being tortured. The “truth” obtained from the victim – regardless of its validity – in turn not only “justifies” the structure of the power ‘behind’ the practice of torture, but also escalates the targets of the torture itself. Torture is thus a means of reaffirming and re-accumulating power.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the victims, the practice of torture has multiple effects of powerlessness. Being tortured without being able to resist, without even being able to recognise the torturer, is itself a form of powerlessness. But a more significant form which might go beyond the primary motive of torture occurs when the victims grow a bigger sense of resentment towards their fellow victims – in their eyes – who have “betrayed” them, rather than toward the torturers themselves. Blaming one’s fellow victims is a form of powerlessness as it is ‘unconsciously’ a kind of agreement to what the torturers have judged. In this case then those who have “betrayed” them are quite often imaged as being worse than the torturers. Since being ‘a traitor’ is more evil, the struggle for becoming human again is translated negatively:

14 The logic of the Suharto’s would-be “New Order” regime was that: “PKI masterminded the ‘September 30, 1965 affair’, and when one was proved to be a communist, or to ‘have an indication’ of being a communist, then s/he must have been involved in the affair”.
a struggle for not being a traitor, not betraying one’s fellow victims. This is the obsession of the central character in the novel, as this section will explore.

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Mawa, being arrested at home, had felt that something wrong would happen to him, since someone had told him to be cautious, and three men with short-cut hair and muscular bodies had been spying him around his house. Since the mass hysteria of anti-communism had been on the rise, he suspected that his arrest was probably related to his activity as an author: he managed a literary magazine, *Mimbar Rakyat* (People's Forum), which published works advocating people’s aspirations. Still he questioned this suspicion, as he had nothing to do with the PKI.

Mawa’s suspicion, however, came true when he was interrogated. The first allegation against him was that he was a PKI member. He rejected this charge, as he had never been one, yet he admitted that he had been a member of a mass organisation in which he worked as a teacher. Suddenly the interrogator – who was wearing a pair of thick sunglasses to cover his facial identity – asked him about his activities in *Mimbar Rakyat* (MR). As Mawa made denials, the interrogator threateningly told him that he could invite a witness. Still Mawa insisted that he knew nothing about MR. The interrogator got stuck. But all of sudden he asked Mawa about Yogi – Mawa’s friend in managing MR. Mawa admitted that he had once met Yogi, but it was in connection with another business. Being upset with this answer, the interrogator threatened Mawa.

“You have tricked me. Do you think I know nothing about your relationship with Yogi? Come on, before I punch you, I’ll give you one last opportunity not to tell a lie. How often did Yogi come to see you?”

“Once, sir”.

Just as I answered that way, one of the interrogator’s hands landed on my face. I was flying down from the chair and falling down to the floor. Before realising where I was existing, a kick had landed on my stomach. I bent my body and my two hands pressured my painful stomach. Spontaneously I held my buttock which had just been kicked down. I felt as if I had broken my back bone, and the pain was flowing up to my nerves. Then I could no longer use my hands to save parts of my body which had been kicked repeatedly. My hands were powerless, as they had repeatedly crashed against the toes of the boots kicking several parts of my body. (pp. 67-68)

Despite such a powerless condition, Mawa did not give in to the interrogator’s threatening questions; his answer remained the same. Then the interrogator confronted Mawa with the responses of Yogi, who was also tortured while being interrogated. As Yogi’s answer was not the same as Mawa’s, what then happened to Mawa was another series of tortures.
If the first round of torture was aimed at forcing Mawa to admit what the interrogator urged him to admit, the second one was a form of punishment and seemed to be more cruel as the interrogator – assisted by some guards – found Mawa to be deceiving him. In the eyes of the interrogator, Mawa had a double guilt, i.e. giving evidence of being a communist and having then denied it. This in turn pushed the interrogator to extract more “information” from Mawa. He seemed to delve further into Mawa’s organisational networks and he kept asking Mawa about several people. As Mawa always said that he knew nothing about them, he was tortured for the third time.

I heard steps approaching me. Then a match was applied, burning my toe. Because of the heat, I was standing in unstable position. Several lashes of the whip hit my calf. The wounds were so painful. (p. 71)

His body, having been treated as the site of power of the interrogators and the torturers, was not only stiff, but also trembling, and so sweaty. He was breathless and wondering:

“Are my lunges no longer able to breathe in, to sustain my life?” (p. 71)

Those series of tortures had really terrorised Mawa every time he was called to the interrogating room. He was always wondering whether what had happened to him would be repeated.

I was wondering whether my body was still strong enough to hold back another torture. Would my hinges be taken off? Would the wounds in my flesh be wider? Would my teeth fall out to hold back the kicks of the boots? (p. 76).

What made it more painful was that Yogi had betrayed him.

In fact I did not keep any secret. I only kept on the deal with Yogi. What a fucking devil!, he had broken the deal, and I had to bear the painful consequences. Shit! (p. 76)

In the following interrogation, he was confronted again with another detainee, Siman, who had been tortured before. Mawa almost failed to recognize him, as

….his eyes had pushed deeply into his swollen eyelids. He twisted his mouth, and his lips got thickened, and formless. (p. 76)

As the interrogator asked him to speak, he [Siman] said:

“I came to his [Mawa’s] house to convey some information”. (p. 77)
Mawa tried to deny that he had met Siman before. This denial seemed to be a spontaneous command for the interrogators and the guards to torture him.

The lashes of the stingray tails thrust at every inch of the surface of my body. The painful effects were quite different from the lashes of rattan I suffered the night before. Stingray tails are jagged, tearing and stinging the skin. I tried to hold back the pain from the lashes. I did not fall down from the chair. I strengthened myself by covering my face with my both hands. I cried out loudly every time a lash thrust at my body. It was my trick to beg the torturers to stop lashing at my body with the tails. ...Eventually I fell down from the chair, fluttering on the floor. Boots several times stepped on my body, and several kicks landed on my stomach. I was breathless. ...My chest was so painful. They stopped torturing me, leaving me sprawled on the floor. (p. 77)

Mawa seemed to have reached the limits of his ability to endure the pain of his tortured body. Being hopeless, he wanted to be shot to death. But some of his fellow *tapols* encouraged him to rebuild a spirit of life. However, he was almost reaching a point of desperation. Life seemed to be no longer meaningful.

“But, why try to remain alive? Two people have betrayed me”. (p. 78)

Although many of his fellow *tapols* showed empathy and solidarity with him, the pain he suffered did not only get onto his body, but also into his heart; and the sense of being betrayed made him feel alone in the world.

In such a lonely feeling, Mawa recalled his memories. As if only people in his past memories would not betray him.

I tried to relax, empowering myself. I remembered a story about the tortures suffered by the Chinese people when fighting against Chiang Kai Shek. I remembered the experience of my father, a farmer who knew nothing about politics but had to suffer from the lashes of *samurai* holster during the Japanese occupation. All of a sudden, the face of my late father clearly appeared in my head. He was smiling, as if showing his pride in my suffering. A thin smile, a pride at seeing that I had not died despite the tortures. His smile was like a whisper: “Be strong with your heart!” (p. 79-80)

Mawa then regained a new spirit of life. He became less desperate. However, a call for an interrogation remained a terror to him. Being interrogated (and tortured) was “like walking through a mass graveyard being guarded by giants with bleeding teeth. It was really horrible” (p. 81). Had he been able to choose, he would have preferred being shot to death, without suffering from any long pain. “But one thing in my death, I remain to have a clean name, not to die as a traitor” (p. 82) (emphasis added).

*Not to die as a traitor* seemed to be the only way Mawa could struggle for what he imagined as human dignity. He indeed once had an idea to escape from the prison, as he could no longer stand the pain of his tortured body. Being tortured was not only
suffering from the physical pain, but also from being insulted. He knew how to be undignified. He wanted to speak up. Yet there was no space left to resist, or even just to question the system of power “which is like Japanese fascism and Hitler’s Nazism” (p. 291). It seems that the only thing he could do was to struggle for survival without betraying other people. What does such a struggle mean for the attitude towards fellow tapols betraying the others? If one becomes a traitor in such terrorising conditions, is it somewhat voluntary, or only because of having been forced to?

In the cases of Yogi and Siman, they really had been tortured in such a painful way that finally they betrayed Mawa. Mawa himself realized that they had betrayed him not because they wanted to, but because they were violently forced to. Even though Yogi explained that the military had trapped him into saying something different from the deal he had made with Mawa, and he was crying when seeing Mawa tortured, Mawa did not believe it completely. He remained suspicious of Yogi and Siman. It was Harun, another tapol, who had caused him remain suspicious of his fellow tapols. As he was about to be interrogated for the first time, Harun told him:

“You have to be suspicious of everybody here, even of me. Heavy tortures can quite often make people unable to bear their sufferings, and this tempts them to give wrong confessions. We all want to survive, but the ways to do so are quite often at the expense of others.” (p. 37)

Mawa was more convinced of what Harun had said to him, as he found that not a few tapols who were seriously regretful of being imprisoned could easily fight against their companions over trivial things. He observed that:

[ it was] … not only ideology that could make people fight against each other. Even coffee and cigarettes among those sharing the common ideology could make them fight against each other. Particularly to those being imprisoned with a very deep sense of regret, as they felt that they had been deceived by the struggle of their organisations, or they had failed to reach their ambitions of getting rich or obtaining high and important positions due to the “September 30, 1965 affair” which happened all of sudden. I found that many people had joined the organisation [PKI] because of their own personal interests. (p. 94)

By such a perception Mawa learned that despite being in the same boat, not every tapol shared the common signification of their present condition. Not every tapol regarded this imprisonment as the cost or the risk involved with an ideological struggle. He did not mean to judge them. He only told himself that such tapols could easily be [forced to be] traitors. In the language of the interrogators and the torturers, such tapols could easily [be forced to] “co-operate” with the rulers of the prison, so that he had to be separated from them.
However, Mawa himself found that an offer “to co-operate” placed a tapol in a very difficult position. He found himself in such a position when he was called to the interrogating room for the fifth time. An offer “to co-operate” had really terrorised him. As he could no longer deny the person with whom he had made a network of activism, it was impossible for him to reject the offer. Besides, rejecting would mean another series of tortures. But, if he accepted the offer, he would lose himself, as he became a traitor.

[Imagine if] I turned into a traitor. Could I catch up and arrest those who were running and hiding themselves as a mouse flees from a cat? Could I punch them to force them to admit all of the allegations? What would their wives say [about me]? What would their children, who had been personally known me, say [about me]? Wouldn’t they charge me with having sent them into a valley of suffering? ... I would do, and do all things which I had never imagined, which I had never expected, which had never been my ambitions.

But you would present a dedication to the state and nation. Was it right? Was it possible to be a traitor and a hero at the same time? (pp. 96-97)

Although Mawa repeatedly said to himself that he did not want to die as a traitor, and he wanted to die with honour, he had to accept the offer, as he could no longer deny his relationship with the person whom the authorities would arrest with his ‘assistance’. He had to help to arrest Acong, his fellow in one organisation. He was supposed to show the way to Acong’s house. But in fact it was a trap, as the military men already knew the way, thanks to information from another tapol, Hanja.

Mawa realised that Acong’s children deeply hated him. They would never forget his betrayal of their father. Yet he still had a hope of apologising, of asking for forgiveness, as his betrayal was not voluntary to.

“Yes, you deserve to hate me. You deserve to accuse me as a traitor of your father, although I did not know what had really happened. You deserve, you deserve to give anything that a traitor has to accept. But one day, I would like to let you and your family know what has really happened to me. I was powerless. Are you willing, if I am still alive, to listen to me? Everything was beyond my control. Are you listening to me? I was a victim. Could you understand it? I was a denigrated victim. …tonight I was a tool, a victim, and defamed. This was beyond my desire; this was not my plan.” (pp. 103-4)

However, knowing that it was Hanja -- Mawa’s friend as well -- who had told Acong’s address to the officers, and suggested the officers take him as the guide, Mawa was in a very dark state of mind. He had been betrayed in order to betray someone.

Such a ‘divide and rule’ trick had been undertaken repeatedly to make tapols suspicious of one and another. I just yelled in my heart: “You [Hanjia] have sacrificed me, damned you!” (p. 105)

In spite of that, Mawa maintained a deep sense of guilt to the Acongs, and he was obsessed with freeing himself from such a feeling. He was restless and sleepless. He
was haunted by what he had done – “betraying” his own fellow. He himself hated it, yet he had been powerless to reject it. Does it mean he could excuse a *tapol* having been forced into becoming a traitor like himself?

In his own case, Mawa wanted an excuse for his ‘betrayal’, but he could not excuse those who had betrayed him. He wanted his case to be understood, but he was unwilling to understand the cases of other ‘traitors’. He was not alone in keeping such an attitude. Most, if not all, of the *tapols* shared it. This was indicated in the question they raised every time the prison guards raided a block of cells: “Who has been the traitor for all of this?” (p. 233).

Being a traitor was intolerable. Any reason for betrayal would not be accepted, even if one ‘became’ a traitor because of having been tortured, let alone if the reason for own survival. This was because almost every *tapol* had experienced torture; and every *tapol* would potentially be tortured at any time. In addition, as a senior *tapol* said to Mawa when the latter was about to be interrogated [and tortured] for the first time: “(Be strong with yourself), no one has died because of being tortured” (p. 63). Even if one died from torture, “this would have a political meaning for the Party and the succeeding cadres. He would be a martyr for the Indonesian communist movement”, said another senior *tapol* (p. 135); and Mawa had no doubt about the consistency between what the senior *tapol* said and what he had experienced: he had been tortured severely, yet he never complained.

It seemed that such a ‘heroic’ discourse of the experiences of being tortured significantly shaped the intolerance of any reason for betrayal. But one thing is obvious: just as one betrayed his fellows, the police or military officers would have been able to arrest them easily, “like catching fish in an aquarium” (p. 112). This made a disgusting kind of sense to a traitor. However, as Mawa told the other *tapols* when they found a *tapol*, Handi, a traitor: “the ways we treat a traitor have to be different from how the rulers have treated us. We should have a higher appreciation of human dignity. .... Otherwise, what is the difference between ‘them’ and ‘us’?” (p. 348-9).

It sounds ambivalent. On one hand, there grew a sense of disgust towards a traitor. On the other hand, there remained a will to treat him as a human being, in the sense of not repeating what the torturers had done on them. But this does not lessen the intolerance of betrayal. Even then the obsession about holding onto the human dignity was translated ‘negatively’: to keep struggling for survival by not betraying other
tapols (p. 367). This means that, to Mawa, however bitter the grievances he suffered, he would keep them to himself. But how long could such a struggle persist?

At the end, Mawa fell sick. In his sickness,

....he no longer recognised himself. His body was rushing around, but his spirit was flying off, penetrating into the bodies of people he met. He was disappearing but alive. He was lost from sight to the prison guards .......he was climbing up to the sky, riding the clouds blown by the wind. (pp. 548-9)

Then he came to what had obsessed him,

“I have freed my humanness” (p. 549).

However,

He left no footprints (p. 549).

Mawa did come to what he struggled for: to die not as a traitor, although he was once trapped into becoming one.

Baconian Perspective and the Discourse of Torture

Despite the problem of reaching a clear-cut definition of torture, it is commonly understood as an infliction of severe pain and suffering upon anyone for certain purposes. By this definition, torture is therefore distinguishable from other forms of political violence such as murdering, disappearing, kidnapping, intimidating, etc., although in practice they are quite often interconnected. It is distinguishable as well from similar actions performed by mentally-ill individuals, as the latter usually have no purpose, or are practising a torture for pleasure.

Such a notion of torture derives from the thoughts of an English philosopher of nature, Francis Bacon (1561-1626). The practice of torture for yielding information, not as a form of punishment, however, can be traced back to the early Middle Ages (Forrest, 1996). As a man of science, Bacon is well-known as “a champion of the discovery of nature’s secrets” (Hanson, 1998:25). In the light of the Renaissance project of “discovery”, he perceived “truth” as something hidden behind the nature; and only through violence and coercion, nature could be made speak for itself, so that it could be dominated (Dubois, 1994; Hanson, 1998).

Bacon adopted such a perspective in his legal practice. Since Elizabethan England was faced the subversive dangers of Roman Catholicism, Bacon, as an agent of the state, came up with his idea of torture as an instrument of accessing the secrets
of the victims (Dubois, 1994:185). It is “a way of knowing that would make those
treasons, as discoverable forms of action, constitute the truth” (Hanson, 1998:27).

He realised that English common law did not allow the accused’s own
testimony to convict himself, but he took for granted the use of torture as a means of‘discovery’. As he explained: “By the laws of England no man is bound to accuse
himself. In the highest cases of treason, torture is used for discovery, and not for
evidence” (cited in Dubois, 1994:183). This means that “information gathered by
torturing the accused can be pursued and used to incriminate others” (Dubois,
1994:183); and as a means of ‘discovering’ the truth, the objective of torture was not
to make the accused confess his guilt, but “to gather information which could be used
for a variety of purposes: to gain more information, to discover more activities, and
eventually, to aid in prosecutions” (Hanson, 1998:40).

Apparently that Bacon’s perspective of torture is very instrumentalist.15 It
perceives torture merely as an instrument for achieving certain objectives. The (moral)
implication of such a perspective is that so long as the objectives are justifiable, the
use of this instrument is tolerable. This poses some problems: who is qualified to
justify the objectives? What constitutes the base(s) of such justification? How
justifiable is such justification?

Despite such questions, this paper is not concerned with the ethical or moral
discourse of torture. By raising such questions, it attempts to show the insensitivity of
the instrumentalist Baconian perspective on torture toward the structure of power it
represents. The indication of this insensitivity is that it cannot explain why torture
persists, regardless of the accumulated information from the victims, or why torture is
practised even when the ‘truth’ is already in the hands of the rulers.

These questions raise a ‘suspicion’ that torture, rather than being an instrument
of power, is itself one form of power. It is from where, rather than to where, power
operates. This implies that the persistence of torture should be grasped in its various
effects upon its victims, rather than in the objectives of its practices. As Elaine Scarry
contends, the objectified pain, as the effect of torture upon the victim, “is denied as
pain and read as power” (Scarry, 1985:45).

15 Studies on “torture worldwide” (such as Jempson, 1996; Kordon, et.al., 1992; and Kelman, 1995)
show that this instrumentalist perspective is mostly known for authoritarian regimes of the modern
world. As not a few such regimes have undergone a transition to democracy, and international pressures
are growing stronger, the practices of torture tend to be eliminated. Yet they still persist in many parts of
the world, “even in highly developed democratic societies” (Kelman, 1995:25).
The close reading of *Merajut Harkat* shows that the very effect of torture upon the victims is not only their powerlessness to resist it, but also their powerlessness to avoid humiliating their fellow prisoners who have ‘betrayed’ the others. It is the ‘traitors’ rather than – or, instead of (?) – the torturers who constitute the ‘direct’ foes of every prisoner. This is not to say that a sense of hostility towards the torturers and the prison’s rulers as the extension of the ruling regime is absent. It is certainly present. But this is suppressed under the resentment toward the ‘traitors’.

Such a double powerlessness shows that torture is a form of power which not only breaks the [possible] resistance of the victims, but also breaks down the victims at once (Kordon, et.al., 1992). In *Merajut Harkat*, this powerlessness is explicitly expressed by a senior tapol: what constitutes the challenge for tapols is “a struggle for survival, instead of a struggle to resist the military regime” (p. 417). This inability to resist is the manifestation of fear, since torture not only locates and isolates the victims, but also “cripples their ‘soul’”. “It breaks them and makes them lose their will. It beats them to make them afraid” (Rejali, 1994:169).

The objective of such a spectacle of power is “to transform the prisoners into dependent, apolitical and asocial individuals” (Rejali, 1994:175). Being suspicious of other prisoners and ‘escaping’ into the past memories – as Mawa did after being tortured for the fourth time -- is likely a manifestation of being an asocial individual. Therefore, instead of engaging with the fellow prisoners experiencing the common condition, a tortured prisoner imagines himself ‘communicating’ with the dead people whom he can trust. This is the manifestation of his “absolute helplessness”: the centrality of pain in torture (Langer, 1998).

In such helplessness, the pain of the tortured body is un-shareable. As Scarry argues, torture is a form of resistance to language. Intense pain as the result of torture is a form of language-destruction (Scarry, 1985). Therefore, in imagining the communication with the dead people, a prisoner does not share (the description of) his pain, but complains about who has made him tortured. This means that it is his revulsion towards the ‘traitors’, rather than his resentment towards the torturers, which he ‘shares’ with the trusted dead people. Torture is thus a form of power which “covers itself” (Scarry, 1985:59), as the victims not only are unable to recognise the [identities of the] torturers, but also are incapable of identifying the ‘web of power’ enabling the practices of torture themselves. It is not only the faces, but also the minds of the victims which are masked.
Seeing such effects upon the victims, torture is thus a form of power which both dehumanises and “absolutely negates the human dignity of not only the victims but also the torturers. This is because torture is the violation of the physical and mental integrity of the individual human being *par excellence*. Wounds may heal, but the psychological damage in most cases is permanent and often leads to the disintegration of the personality. And it is their personality that makes humans ‘human’, which constitutes their dignity” (Kooijmans, 1995:15). In other words, it is a form of power which reduces the body to a substance that produces pain (Lingis, 1994). Thus, it is “the grossest form of inhumanity that exists” (Zulueta, 1996:87).

In *Merajut Harkat*, such dehumanising effects can be read in how Mawa made sense of being a *tapol*. He found that “between being a *tapol* and a thing is slightly different”, since:

…all things have functions like *tapols*. All things have prices like *tapols*. …All things cannot reject when they are moved here and there like *tapols*. All things have no hands and legs unlike *tapols*. All things have no sense of longing unlike *tapols*. All things are counted in numbers like *tapols*. Some people will get sad when they lose their belongings, but the rulers will not be so when a *tapol* dies. All things can be destroyed (whatever people want) like *tapols*. All things have no desire, unlike *tapols*. All things are ordered by law unlike *tapols*. All things are controlled by their owners like *tapols* under the rulers. All things cannot curse unlike *tapols*. All things do not need food and drink unlike *tapols*. All things can be kept in storage like *tapols*. All things can be dumped anywhere like *tapols*. (pp. 398-399)

Have the dehumanising effects reached such an extreme point, no wonder that knitting together human dignity is becoming an obsession: returning a *tapol* and a thing to be in a separable category, as a *tapol* is, however, a human being, and a thing is a thing.

Rejecting the offer “to co-operate” with the torturers is one way of realising such an obsession. By so doing, a *tapol* has at least affirmed that he is a human being, since he has a will, or is able to revive his own will, and is not a thing which can be moved anywhere. Like in the illustration in Felicity de Zulueta’s chapter in Duncan Forrest’s *A Glimpse of Hell*, a Tunisian man, “when asked why he did not co-operate under all of the pressure, answered that he wanted to preserve his dignity. He could not admit that people can be forced against their will. To admit it ‘is to feel humiliated in the every depth of my being’” (Bloomstein as cited in Zulueta, 1996: 87). No wonder that then there is no tolerance towards ‘a traitor’.

Refusing to “co-operate” on such a reason is, to some extent, a form of resistance, although it is not an act against the penetrating power into the body. (Even by such ‘in-cooperativeness’, a prisoner could suffer from another torture). It is at least an effort to keep oneself acceptable to one’s fellow prisoners, so that there is still a *sense of community*: one thing which a regime of torture always attempts to destroy.
On the other hand, as the very implication of the obsession to preserve the human dignity is a revulsion towards the ‘traitors’ rather than towards the torturers, it is [unconsciously] a form of an agreement to the latter’s accusations. Blaming the ‘traitors’ is an acceptance of what the torturers have charged. Thus it is paradoxical: in its resistance there is some obedience.

Such an obedience has something to do with the working mechanism of torture. As Herbert Kelman argues that torture is best understood as “a crime of obedience” (Kelman, 1995). It is a form of power which always desires to produce ‘obedient’ subjects, who are supposed to function in a hierarchical structure; and this is undertaken by (re-)producing an insecure feeling within the victims and potential victims (Zulueta, 1996: 90-101). Torture is therefore a form of power which bases its persistence not on its objectives, but on its ultimate and escalating effects, that is the fear and obedience of its actual and potential victims. In this case, torture, paraphrasing Michael Taussig’s, “took on a life of its own” (Taussig, 1992:164). However, unlike Taussig’s argument, it is not an embodiment of “culture of terror”, in the sense of “a totalising condition that orchestrated the rhythms of daily life”. Rather, it is a form of power from which, paraphrasing Jane Margold’s, “punishable categories of people” are created [and reproduced] (Margold, 1999: 64-66).

In the context of Suharto’s New Order regime, since it legitimised itself on the basis of its success in “saving the state ideology Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution from the betrayal of the PKI”, being charged as a communist is nothing less than being categorised as a punishable person. Therefore, if in Merajut Harkat the struggle for survival is translated into an effort to reject the accusation [of being a Communist] by not betraying the others, it is nothing less than admitting the ‘truth’ of such a punishable category.16 Hardly any character in the novel accepts the accusation, and challenge it at once: “Yes, I am a member of PKI, and what is wrong with it?”17 A

16 This is unlike Irish Catholics in Elizabethan England. From the perspective of English rulers, they were tortured not primarily because they were Catholics and Irish, but because Irish Catholics were ‘traitors’. As they never identified themselves as such, they realised that they were tortured because they were Catholics and Irish. Torturing a group of individuals because of their social categories and, moreover, their faith, makes the victims perceive it as a discourse of martyrrology. Instead of putting an end to their “Irish”-ness and “Catholic”-ness, they were more convinced that being Catholic and Irish was not wrong (Hanson, 1998:34-35).

17 All of my respondents were enthusiastic in telling their bitter experiences during their imprisonment, but they were reluctant to talk about their political activities before the “1965 affair” happened. Even many of them said that what they did had nothing to do with PKI. This sounds contradictory to their ‘analysis’ that the extermination of PKI was a significant part of the scenario of the ‘neo-imperialist’ forces to overthrow Sukarno. If they maintain such an ‘analysis’, they do not need to deny their political engagement with the Party, or any of its mass organisation.
regime of torture seems to be so powerful that death, as Mawa experienced, seems to be the only way to break and end the paradox of the counter response to it, knitting together the [human] dignity.

Concluding Remarks

As a form of state-sponsored violence, torture is more than just an instrument to obtain the ‘truth’. It is not merely a means of extracting information from the victims. Rather it is a form of power itself. Its persistence and how it operates are not (completely) determined by the objectives designed by the state, but are “taking on a life of its own”. Rather than the instrument of a regime, it itself is a regime which governs and controls.

As a regime of power, torture demonstrates its power by covering itself. This is undertaken by directing the sense of humiliation of the victims towards their fellows (who have betrayed them), rather than towards the torturers. However, a sense of resentment toward the latter is not absent. It is suppressed in such a way that it is as if a regime of torture exists and operates because of the “faults” of the “other” victims upon the (re-) victimised “self”. Thus, torture is a regime of power that produces a common suffering which does not enable its victims to feel unified by their shared grievances. Instead, the victims suspect one another.

Perhaps because of such an effect, torture persists. Yet its persistence is only possible so long as the sense of resentment to the torturers (and their supporting agents) is suppressed. To eradicate the regime of torture can probably be done by releasing such a suppressed feeling, but the possible cost is revenge.

Probably, deconstructing the punishable categories of people produced and reproduced by a regime of torture is one way to eradicate torture. Yet this deconstructing project is only possible when the historical narrative serving as the source of producing the punishable categories is de-composed, de-simplified, and re-examined. A discourse of martyrology which sounds to counter a regime of torture should be avoided, as this potentially can produce another regime of torture.

References


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