

Leader of the flak

*Political activism, feminism and sex are the hallmarks of a woman at the vanguard of moves by Indonesians to shake off a conservative past, writes **Yenni Kwok***



Nearly eight years since *Saman* was published in Indonesia, taking the book world there by storm, Ayu Utami has seen immense changes in her life. Once a relatively unknown journalist, her debut novel has sold more than 150,000 copies and been reprinted 34 times in its original language. *Saman* is now a cause celebre – and its outspoken 37-year-old author is sought after by an Indonesian media hungry for her frank commentary.

Now available in English, the novel, set against the backdrop of former president Suharto's iron-fist rule in the 1990s, follows the friendship of four young women and its protagonist, Saman, a Catholic priest turned human rights activist.

It's a tale of both sexual and political awakening. Laila's quest for love is interlocked with the idealistic bravery of Saman as he and a group of villagers take on a military-backed plantation company.

Saturated in references to Christianity – Ayu was raised a Catholic – the book touches on such taboos as extra-marital affairs, and relations between Christians and Muslims, and those between people of Indonesian and Chinese descent.

"I'm often interviewed about the latest issues in society," says Ayu in a laid-back cafe in downtown Jakarta. "Especially those related to freedom of expression and morality. I always use this opportunity to be as incisive as possible."

Ayu was the first female writer in Indonesia who talked openly about sex and sexuality – topics traditionally off limits for women. She says that *Saman*, which won the Prince Claus Award in 2000, is both politically and sexually inspired.

"*Saman* is my experiences during Suharto's New Order," she says. "The book is driven by problems suffered by women, the social-political injustice caused by the government and my own restlessness about sexuality and God."

"The rhythm of *Saman* is like a sexual encounter that experiences premature ejaculation. The story builds up sensually. The further it goes, the more erotic it becomes, and then suddenly it stops. It's like the character Saman, who doesn't have any sexual experience."

Born in November 1968 in the town of Bogor, an hour from Jakarta, Ayu studied Russian literature at university and worked as a journalist for a number of publications. In 1994, she and fellow journalist-activists founded the Association of Independent Journalists to protest against the government's closure of three news magazines.

It was a courageous act that would later cost her job, land scores of activists in jail and expose her to the life of underground political activism, which was to become the inspiration for *Saman*.

Despite bold references to sex and politics, *Saman*, a fragment of an unfinished novel, was published without problems – possibly because it came out in the last chaotic weeks of Suharto's rule.

But another controversy was brewing, not so much to do with the book's content as with its author. It seemed unfathomable that a young, attractive woman who had written no previous books could weave a gripping narrative about sexuality and politics so rich in detail and nuance. Rumour had it that the real author was her mentor and friend, the male poet Goenawan Mohamad.

For Ayu, a feminist, the accusation was annoying. "I never feel I should answer it," she says. "A woman is discriminated against both in positive and negative senses. A woman is thought unable to do anything – that's a negative discrimination. When she succeeds, she'll be praised greatly because women are considered inferior – that's positive discrimination."

In 2001, Ayu published *Larung*, the sequel to *Saman*, and she now looks back on the uproar with calm detachment. But the release of her first novel marked a watershed in Indonesian writing. Prior to *Saman*, Indonesian literature was dominated by middle-aged male writers. Now the situation is reversed. Books by young women such as Ayu herself, Dewi Lestari, Djenar Maesa Ayu, Nukila Amal and others are best-sellers – a genre known as "fragrant literature".

"It's a term coined by the mass media," Ayu says. "It's not a serious literature critique. There is no similarity between me, Dewi or Djenar, except that we are female and urban writers."

Since the English-language edition of *Saman* was released in September, Ayu has become a global traveller as she promotes her work. "It's been quite a lot of travel," she says, listing her recent destinations: literary festivals in Singapore and Ubud, Bali, in October, the Iowa Writing Programme in November and the City Stories Festival in New Delhi last month. After attending the Man Hong Kong International Literary Festival this month, she'll be off to South Africa and New York.

Ayu continues to work to push the boundaries in conservative Indonesia. Her third novel, still in the writing and tentatively titled *Jalan Sita (Sita's Way)*, is inspired by the Javanese myth of a woman who has a snake living in her womb. It's the story of a woman who believes she always brings death to her lovers.

A few years ago, Ayu directed an erotic short film, *Jamu*, starring herself and her boyfriend, photographer Erik Prasetya. In her collection of essays, *Parasit Lajang (Single Parasite)*, she says she will never tie the knot with anybody. "Women don't have to marry to be happy," she says.

Although she no longer works as a curator at Teater Utan Kayu, the Goenawan-founded arts centre that has been a hotbed for activists, she continues to be a vocal defender of freedom and recently agreed to become a

guest editor for *X!* men's magazine to oppose a zealous campaign against pornography.

"The anti-pornography movement here has become too vocal and too simplistic, treating all forms of sexuality and eroticism as pornography," Ayu says. "I simply feel some moral values are unfair, so I have to shatter them."

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