

Laksmi's international musings frame the colour of Indonesian life

*The former food critic is creating a splash with stories based on paintings. She puts **Yenni Kwok** in the picture of her career*



It's easy to think that writing literature is merely Laksmi Pamuntjak's latest quest in life. After all, she has transformed herself from being a classical pianist to a political columnist, food critic and founder of a chic English-language bookstore in Jakarta. Yet the Indonesian author, who writes in English, has created quite a literary buzz.

Laksmi's work sets her apart from many young Indonesian authors. The 35-year-old delves into a vast range of topics: food, music, politics and mythology, from culinary and cultural critique, to fine art and fiction.

The Diary of R.S. - Meditations on Arts, one of her latest offerings, is a collection of short stories inspired by her favourite paintings. "Most of the stories are my very personal responses to paintings I've come to love," says Laksmi.

The painters are mainly European - among them Salvador Dali, Max Beckmann, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Edvard Munch – but their paintings stirred Indonesian musings. "Through the paintings, I saw Indonesia – or rather scenes of Indonesia," she says.

Toulouse-Lautrec's *Woman at Her Toilet: Mme Poupoule*, which depicts a downtrodden woman looking in a mirror, led her to pen *The Prostitute and the Dwarf*, a story set in Jakarta with the male protagonist is modelled after the diminutive French painter. "I asked myself the question: 'What does a woman have to go through to end up looking like that?'" she says. "The canvas may be set in a very specific Paris, but it can equally speak about two marginalised people in the Jakarta of today."

Ellipsis highlights her reflections on her travels to New York, Germany, Shanghai and beyond.

"Poetry also taught me that no subject is ever of one root, of one home, or even of one language," says the writer, who recently published her second volume of poetry, *The Anagram*. "Words are always intertwined with memory, and the storeroom of our memory creates that ravine – our own private world. When one writes, one inevitably lives in the private world of that language."

Laksmi made her publishing debut with *The Jakarta Good Food Guide* in 2001. Having contributed restaurant reviews to The Jakarta Post – under the nom de plume Epicurus, after the ancient Greek philosopher who theorised about pleasure – she decided to write the first comprehensive guide of Jakarta's restaurants and food.

Although she also writes in Indonesian, writing in her mother tongue is restricted to non-fiction. Her most recent work in Indonesian is *War, Heaven and Two Women*, a treatise on the relationship between men, faith, violence and the Iliad mythology. It was also a daring cross-cultural attempt: The famous Greek epic is relatively unknown to Indonesians, but the issues of faith and violence ring true. Laksmi says she is more comfortable composing fiction and poems in English rather than in Indonesian. "I simply have more references," she says. "I read largely English books, not just the canons but also contemporary works."

The writer admits "loneliness" is the word that sums up the feeling of an Indonesian who writes in English. Ironically, the language is the perfect medium to express her feeling of not belonging to one particular root.

Laksmi was born in December 1971 in Jakarta, her father of West Sumatran

origin, her mother from Central Java. Having lived in Europe for a quarter of their lives, her parents converse in a mixture of Indonesian and Dutch.

Laksmi studied and lived in Singapore and Australia, and feels equally at ease with Indonesian and English. She attributes her literary interest to her upbringing. Her mother, a women's rights activist, taught her to read when she was three. She was always surrounded by books, her father belonging to one of Indonesia's oldest publishing families. "Reading, the love of reading, is what makes you dream of becoming a writer," she says.

Laksmi began writing short stories, journal entries and poems when she was six. By the time she was eight, she won her first national writing competition. Even when she pursued other interests, such as music, her passion for writing never left her. She sees no difference between music and literature.

"The study of music requires the same love and intensity [as writing and reading]," says Laksmi. Her favourite quote is from Susan Sontag: "To write is to practise, with particular intensity and attentiveness, the art of reading."

Laksmi divides her time between Jakarta and Singapore, where her 11-year-old daughter Nadia attends school. Although she avoided Jakarta's floods in February, she feels awful whenever anything bad befalls her home country.

"I almost feel guilty living in disaster-free Singapore," she says. It is clear where her roots are.

The interview was published in the South China Morning Post daily (www.scmp.com), 18 March 2007.