

# **The Wretched of the City: The Urban Poor as Perceived by the Malay-Indonesian Intelligentsia**

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“We, so they tell us, have built the economy,  
but what good fortune is ours?”

Usman Awang

## **Introduction**

The growth of cities and its urbanization process has been a phenomenon that gets much attention from the educated section of the society. Malay-Indonesian intelligentsia, from the academic scholars to the literati circles, have noted the growth and expansion of cities from a much critical lens, inasmuch as some would celebrate it as a symbol of their nation’s achievement. The city is a site of hope, albeit tough it could be for those who try their luck in search of a better living. The city, especially the nation’s capital, is also a symbol of pride, for the ruling elite and masses too. It was the site of the past kingdoms, the colonial economic and administrative hub, and the capital for the newly independent nations. While urban planners and politicians have hailed the cities as part of the developmentalist vision, the critical voices within the society have noted the dehumanized conditions in the urban areas, including its sprawling slums. The expansion of the cities saw also the rise of the urban poor due to massive rural-urban migration inasmuch as the neo-liberal economic model gives rise to the economic and social disruptions.

This chapter argues that any discussions on cities purely from the developmental and urban studies that ignores the human dimension, is highly problematic. Studying the city should be part of our conscience and moral imagination. The views from local critical scholarship and literary perspectives provide useful insights that could be part of an ethical and humanist discourse in development studies. Urban planning, purely for its technocratic, economic and aesthetical considerations will have no meaning as long as we remain silent and ambivalent of the human dimension.

## **1. The Urban Poor: Knowing Them**

The wretched of the city include the slums inhabitants, the homeless, the street children, the poor families who live in crammed public housing, including the migrant workers in the city working under deplorable conditions. Hence the notion of human misery, displacement and

deprivation must surface in our present comprehension of what a living city should be. The poorest of the poor in the Indonesian/Malaysian cities are called *gelandangan*. In the Malay-Indonesian parlance, it refers to those people from the rural and urban areas who have no permanent housing nor employment, transiting from one place to another in search for basic necessities for survival. They are deemed as socially nuisance, though their cheap labour is a necessity for the city. “*Gelandangan* is a phenomenon of social, economic and cultural poverty experienced by a small section of the city’s inhabitant, putting them at the lowest rung of the urban population.”<sup>1</sup>

The existence of the *gelandangan* is seen as the problem to the city’s authorities. Their living conditions are unsightly, their presence deemed as nuisance and even threatening the public order and security. They are an embarrassment to the city/state if they are to be seen by foreign dignitaries visiting the city.<sup>2</sup> But it is the presence and plight of the *gelandangan* that becomes one of the persistent symbols against the developmentalism, and as inspiration to the Malay-Indonesian literary circles. The latter see that the plight of the urban poor must be incorporated into their literary repertoires, as part of upholding the torch of conscience of the people and nation.

Often times we assume that we know the poor, and we feverishly debate as to who they are, with various criteria and definitions. A Filipino sociologist, Randolph David calls for a committed deliberation on the subject of the urban poor. Disinterestedness as plaguing in some academic circles only has the stamina to describe all in the name of being “objective.”<sup>3</sup> The conditions of the urban poor cannot be simply being described or enumerated, such as how they cope with their poverty, with a scientific conceptualization of the “culture of poverty.” There is a need instead to ask why they are poor and subjected to such miseries. As David asserts: “Urban poverty as it manifests itself in slum and squatter communities is a structurally generated condition. Its roots extend to forces within and outside society. At the abstract level, urban poverty implies a relationship of dependence – a relationship which produces further underdevelopment for the poor and continued development for the affluent. This relationship is understandably well protected by those who profit from its maintenance. Its by-products are well known to all of us – slum life, malnutrition, sickness, criminality, vice, prostitution, overcrowding, etc.”<sup>4</sup>

Hence deliberating on the wretched city, of its wretched inhabitants, cannot simply end with hopelessness, nor simply an academic exercise of [dis]covering such “humane” topic. Our criticisms must invoke our consciousness and persistency to call for a *living* city, or the existence of a decent society. The city (not just concrete infrastructure, but its living inhabitants) must be part of our engaging repertoire. Social scientists engaging in the studies of urban slums, in the words of David, cannot just stop at their “romantic interest” in unfolding how the poor adjust and learn to live with their miseries, but to courageously pose the

questions the reasons for their state of affairs.

## 2. [Re/Un]Thinking Urban Development

Our discursive repertoire on cities and development must be sensitive to the plight of the urban poor, heighten awareness that their rights as fellow citizens (or foreign workers for that matter) to be safeguarded, especially in the context of a rapacious neo-liberal economic setting. Thus, if we speak of the city [re]development, they must be included ; their needs considered, and their voices heard in the planning. Planning for the human needs must be at the centre stage. In the words of Soedjatmoko, a prominent Indonesian public intellectual: “Development is ultimately meaningless, unless it also enlarges and multiplies opportunities, economic as well as non-economic, on the personal level, not just for a small elite but for the whole population.”<sup>5</sup> The fate of the poor and the weak, that must be give prime attention, such as access to education, employment, health services, housing, transportation, all aimed at reducing the prevailing patterns of inequality.<sup>6</sup>

## 3. The Urban Ecology

The state of affairs of an expanding but decaying cities has been noted by several social scientists. Stanislav Andreski’s *Parasitism and Subversion*, which described the condition in Latin American countries, can also be found its parallels in other Third World countries. Big cities in Latin American countries, he noted, “in some ways they are modern than London or Paris , but they have slums which are bigger and more primitive than anything...”<sup>7</sup> It is in the cities, where we can find the most blatant demonstration of the luxurious mansions of the rich and the shanty home/boxes of the poor in the slums. The decaying and chaotic city, where class division is most apparent, does not encourage an organic communitarian feeling. Others have noted how buildings in Southeast Asian cities are constructed using the model of temperate region, while the equatorial climate is not computed in the design scheme. Often city authorities, in sheer waste, commissioned the postmodern designer bus stops, (often inspired from the First World) whose flat rooftop could not even shelter the people from the heavy rain and the scorching sun. In the name of beautifying the city, green parks are built, but it usually not for the majority as its location normally around the middle and upper class residential belt. The city slums hardly have any greenery; with shoddy built roads and potholes as uncommon sight, terribly poor sanitation, congestion and pollution, and the lack of educational and health facilities. In the enthusiasm to build a world class city, and boosting tourism, plazas and malls are built. The limited land in the cities, meant that the areas occupied by the poor in the slums or the city’s fringe or centre, will be the target of “development.” The poor will be the first one to go, and usually too the last to reap any benefits from the city’s infrastructures.

#### **4. Equity and Efficiency Needed**

The wretched of the city are the victims of the social and economic injustices in the capitalistic development process. The problems of the poor, already impoverished since the colonial time is aggravated by the neo-liberal economic order. The process of state building, where authoritarian power of the state is increasingly imposed, saw ever more the relegation and the marginalization of the poor. Their voice is muted, if not totally silenced, during the time we enthusiastically celebrate the “globalized world.” City planning, the type of infrastructures built tells us the extent of which the needs of the urban poor are being considered. As the city expanded with more development projects, land grabbing needed to build exclusive areas for the rich becomes more common. The poor are further squeezed occupying the ghetto areas of the city. But the robust city development saw more skyscrapers, malls, condominiums, and even country club and golf courses within the city’s vicinity. Although many have noted that living in the city is stressful, the intensity of the discomfort differs from one class to another. For the affluent middle class who faced the congested and polluted cities, they can escape occasionally by fleeing to the suburban and hinterland, resting in their private bungalows and country clubs. The wretched poor have nowhere to go, nor the means and the time off from their lowly paid jobs.

Apparently, the poor becomes alienated, or even humiliated. There is hardly any consideration for them in urban [re]development. If the city planners can plan the affluent section of city, with better roads and parks, lighting and other good amenities, the poor’s slum notoriously becomes the most hazardous place to live in. Youths in working class neighbourhood have hardly any space for recreation to play or even to study. More plots of land go for the building of malls and car parks, while civic space for sports and games is severely limited. Interestingly even plots of land that they once played soccer, are now cordoned off to be leased to private organizations for their private recreational ground. Such situation is not uncommon, especially in the context of liberalization, while the corporatized city councils are more eager to generate profit than to ensure the welfare of the common people.

From time to time, the plight of the poor is raise via forums, studies and even in demonstrations. Generally the issues of environmental degradation, the collapsed of basic infrastructures, overpopulation, and general pressure and stress on the urban population, have been largely the concern of a small group of social scientists and urban planners, including environmentalist activists. However, the raising of consciousness on these matters is severely limited especially when the general ideological and discursive milieu has not taken up this subject seriously, and that such concern only becomes the interest of a few green activists and academic researchers. The environmental degradation and the dehumanized urban living conditions, sometimes when treated in the educational curriculum, is one that interested in

it “academically.” To go beyond it is considered as an activism, if not politically motivated, thus inappropriate for education. Hence it is no surprise the engagement on these issues, not affecting everyone directly and contemporarily, has yet to become central in their imaginative, educative, and social concerns. But slowly, as the issues are taken up by the literary and cultural circles, there will be a greater chance that it will get a wider public attention.

## 5. Intellectual and Moral Conscience of the Intelligentsia

The question of social injustices should be taken up by the intellectual groups of the society. The intelligentsia as a group bearing the conscience of the society, plays an important role in taking stand on the issues of poverty, environmental degradation and erring development. The rise of modern Malay-Indonesian intelligentsia, and its related literary and intellectual discourse, is essentially an urban phenomenon, often from the rural background.<sup>8</sup> The conditions of the city, apparently in its overcrowding, congested and malfunctioning amenities, are the realities of contemporary life in many Third World cities, including the countries in this region. The literary intelligentsia as a social group forms one of the largest bulk of the society’s educated or literate section. They have documented their views and position pertaining politics, economic, social, cultural and the like. The main focus is to see how the human predicaments as experienced by man and society, in this case the urban poor, are taken up by the Malay Indonesian literary intelligentsias. Thus a few works by some leading authors, who are critical of the conditions of life in the cities will be highlighted.<sup>9</sup> Their views and perspectives are not special in term of its novelty, but by its consistency and persistency. While some observers have noted that the critiques on tradition, rural poverty and the condemnation against the backward, corrupt and immoral leadership, have featured predominantly in Malay-Indonesian literature, another sub-theme that is increasingly taken up is about the prevailing living conditions in the urban areas. Our writers, witnessing and experiencing the lives in the cities, offer important insights and perspectives, which could make their audience to be aware of the prevailing living conditions in the cities, one that is characterized by dehumanizing, chaotic and corruptive features. This is part of their larger commitment in appropriating the literary medium to encapsulate their thought, frustration and reflection about man and society.

Mochtar Lubis, a well-known Indonesian writer and journalist, captures this point succinctly noted his own experience of encountering the poor in the most damned area of the city. He was disgusted at the gross injustices, from which he was inspired to write about it so as to get attention from the public and the ruling elite. The urban poor is described movingly in his poem, *A Ballad of The Cigarette Butt Collector*, a sight that is not uncommon in Jakarta:

Along the busy street of the city  
From morning till the sun’s scorching rays

The cigarette butt collector nonchalantly  
 Taking a step with heads down to the street  
 Eyes focus in search of the butts  
 ....  
 ...  
 In search of food along the road  
 Like an abandoned chicken moving astray <sup>10</sup>

While the poor rural migrants supplied the cheap labour, amongst them are many poor girls who turn to prostitution, again supplying “recreation” for the men in the city, offering them the “dream” after all the stress of the daily routine. A poem title “A Little Girl on the Lonely Junction,” written by one Indonesian writer illustrates this existence:

Every day in the city, every bustling day  
 A young girl with no name  
 Sells a dream on the lonely junction  
 A very little girl  
 She doesn't care, nor understood:  
 Who is the virgin  
 Who is the devil  
 She has been alone  
 Before she even knows the word romance  
 When you meet, she is as old as the holy book  
 What are you looking for little girl in this late nite?  
 Don't you afraid of dead bodies wondering?  
 Ah, I am waiting for dead soul to pass by here  
 He gives me light, I give him dream  
 Go back girl, go back dear  
 .....  
 And where do I go back to?  
 Give me a cigarette and light one for me  
 And sir, do you want a dream ?<sup>11</sup>

Amongst the local intelligentsia, the literary group, by virtue of the vernacular language that they used, made them to be a dominant voice in the local discursive and cultural exchanges. Those who expressed their thought eloquently have a wider audience and appeal to various sectors of society. Often, their thought provoking creative works and essays are a good site

where their critical and creative articulations could be found. It will be interesting to note, where the academia was more busied with defining the poor from the competing academic definitions and theorization, the literary intelligentsia, have come forth to address the plight of the poor, at the time where the religious elites busied in their eternal projects, while the politicians always calculating for their political mileage. Many others, be it in the academia or the government, have little or no interest altogether on the poor and the marginalized.<sup>12</sup>

The modern Malay literature, in its evolution as art forms encapsulating Malay thought and values, documents the struggles of the common people in the context of the colonial and post-independent order. *Salina*, a novel by A Samad Said, a leading Malaysian literary figure, narrates the wretchedness of post-war life of poverty and moral degradation in the Rochore slum of Singapore.<sup>13</sup> *Salina*, a woman victim of the War, leads a life of psychological and material turbulence, with the inescapable poverty cycle means she and others under her care are trapped forever. Earlier, Harun Aminurashid, a renowned Malay writer, wrote a novel *Simpang Perinang*, that narrates the life of poverty in a village on the fringe of Singapore city.<sup>14</sup> Harun's narration throws the message of the struggle and resilience of a poor family whose only hope is to get a decent education for their children as a means to uplift their condition. But their struggle, the poverty that they have to go through, speaks volume of how the poorest of the city eked out miserably so as to ensure they do not go into hunger. Again the struggle for uplifting one's condition of poverty is taken up in a novelette *Kota Airmata* (The City of Tears), written by another prominent Singapore writer, Mohamed Latiff Mohamed. The novel is about Ani, a girl from a poor Malay family in Singapore who struggles to complete her education in school. There was hardly any support, and her parents struggling even to pay the meager school fees. In school, the teacher blames her, at home she has to deal with her drunkard father, and finally she was cheated by a man who had made her pregnant. The story ends with Ani takes her own life, but this very tragic end is just a mere statistical report in a bustling city, where the presence and absence of people like Ani has no meaning whatsoever.<sup>15</sup>

On a more cynical note Baha Zain's "The City Exile" the city conjures many dreams and hopes, for those who migrate to it, especially the rural downtrodden, its realities are painfully real, while its promises facile and empty:

There's something out of place here  
 In this famed and violent Kuala Lumpur  
 In this stalled and suffocating Kuala Lumpur  
 ...  
 This is a refuge of the young  
 ...  
 This is a city of your dreams



I have long ago fallen asleep in it  
 Dreaming a day of happiness  
 Of a park with sweet scented unlike the heaven's fragrance  
 With straight and quiet lanes  
 Like the hearts of all saints  
 A safe city for pedestrian  
 And polite citizens  
 But these are strange dreams  
 Empty and futile,  
 For all times.<sup>16</sup>

## 6. Voicing Dissent

While the modern city, with its tallest buildings, sprawling malls and historical monuments become the pride of many populist politicians, there was almost a total silence on its hectic and chaotic conditions; where substandard roads, housing, sanitations, safety and other social amenities get worsen over the years, with the population expansion straining more the city's resources. Urban redevelopment saw the eviction of slums and villages in the cities, with land acquisitions made by the authorities in the name of building social infrastructures, would ironically end up as exclusive areas of private properties and condominiums.<sup>17</sup> Often in the transaction/eviction the poor with little representations have little bargaining power before the state and its commercial alliance.

As a group, the poor and the marginalized section of the society, may not be able to voice out their rights and demands, while their grievances are usually seen to be disruptive to the public order. While some seriously ponder on the congested and dehumanized conditions of the urban areas, there are some unthinking politicians who thought that it is only through urbanizing the poor villagers that their lot can be better and secured.<sup>18</sup> The rural life is deemed with all negativities, while the city is emblematic of progress, modernity and development. But the population explosion will put great stress on the city resources, natural environment and the quality of life. Underground water supply will be depleted and polluted, causing a dire ecosystem crisis. Soon the city beset by unemployment, poor health services, lack of education and housing, will become unlivable and ungovernable.<sup>19</sup>

Goenawan Mohamad, a prominent Indonesian literary figure, and considered as a lending public intellectual, wrote a succinct journalistic essay titled "The Street" which he observed the condition of a neighbourhood which has lost its meaning to its residents.<sup>20</sup> A sharp observation is relevant to be quoted at length:

I live in a city where birds do not usually sing on branches of tamarind trees, but are



hidden in the corners of houses and in stalls at pet markets. This is a city where bulbul birds are caged, *mina* birds are trapped, turtledoves are hoisted up to the tips of high poles, and doves are arranged in dovecotes for the enjoyment of their masters. In Jakarta, birds are not part of the city; not like the thousands of pigeons that decorate Venice, or the thousands of turtledoves in Honolulu, that perch on anyone at all, play with anyone, whether in walled *piazza* or in parks with dozens of trees. I hear the sound of that bird, and suddenly I realize: birds and communal space are two elements mutually supportive. Both should be signs of a city that recognizes our rights to enjoyment, leisure, and pleasurable chance meetings. But here around me is where birds and space are shunted aside, put in places I cannot always reach, where parks have lost their meaning, and *piazza*—which in small towns in Java are called *alun-alun*—are a surprise.

Over time the modern cities that have evolved have become less humane, but become an oasis for the rich. The power of money dictates the city's landscape. One obvious change is the privatization of land, activities and lifestyles:

Near my house there used to be a large field with green grass, a place where children played soccer or flew their kites. Now that field has become a row of fancy apartments. There are some sports areas that are always attracting players, but they are surrounded by a high fence and security guards. And the children? They play soccer in the gaps in the traffic, like refugees in a mean country, like ostracized illegal immigrants. Yes, here's my life in a city with privatized birds, privatized grass, privatized sport, and privatized leisure... There is a moment when privatization dramatically constructs a city. Private houses, offices, all the business involved with land and building has invigorated the economy—and the market is alive because of the trade of cement and door hinges, the services of contractors, the sweat of coolies, and the fearsomeness of the security guards. Privatisation also sparks the creativity in offices of architects and interior designers, and sharpens the skills of the engineers. The city, like many things, becomes something because capital and profit give it birth and shape it—just as the modern period rose spectacularly in the hands of the bourgeoisie, as Marx and Engels said.

Most notably the common street has gone. To Goenawan, the street has a tremendous significance, correlated to the very meaning of the city:

But the city is a city because there are streets, and a street is a street because it is a communal space. Streets, like the *alun-alun*, *piazza* and parks, do not merely have an economic function. Each public space, in the history of any city, has political meaning.

This is why there is the idiom ‘to the streets!’—an act of defiance carried out by the crowd to get something by force. Spiro Kostof wrote *The City Assembled*, a book beautiful to look at the first class in content, about the city through history. He says; ‘the fundamental reality of the street is that it is political’. Particularly because of the nature of the streets itself: the street is territory where the public is prioritized over individual rights—for example the right to choose a place to make a home. It is the street, too, that gives structure to a community. In other words, streets point out something: there are things that should not be touched by privatization. If this were not so, we don’t know what would happen, other than conflict, accidents, and jostling and destroying each other. Here the street acts like the *alun-alun*, a place where people meet, watch games, show their solidarity. So the city is not a group of buildings and houses. The city—and here the street can become its metaphor—is a meeting place, a process of exchange, movement, shuffling positions, and solidarity. Because of this, the city is also a public conversation, if not a public debate. What is saddening now in Jakarta is that even the public authority that is supposed to organize the streets has itself been privatized: corruption and bribery—which involve almost every dealing with local government—have turned what is important for the public into what is important for the private life of Mr.Official.

Rendra, another leading Indonesian playwright and poet, similar to those uttered by social scientists, but with more moving and eloquent tone, stressed that in the planning of the city, the villages cannot be ignored. To him the way the cities like Jakarta is being managed like a village. While the European cities grew out of industrialization, the cities in Indonesia emerged “as a centre to channel foreign production” into the country.<sup>21</sup> The feudal cities of the past kingdom buttressed only the ruling class. Feudalism was entrenched ever more. City like Jogjakarta is now in haphazard. Gone is the serenity, the meditative and the spiritual side of Jogjakarta. While some are eager to welcome foreign investment for the city expansion, Rendra was more cautious. The tourist industry are controlled and reaped by the foreign interests, from hotel, transportation to the dining menu. “The profit from tourism,” he noted “reached to the locals are very minimal.” The noise pollution intensified due to the infrastructures of roads that function mainly for foreign economic interest, which to him have a dire effect on the villages. Indeed cities do not exist in isolation. Its sustainability is determined also by its relations with the rural areas, as in the case of many Third world countries. Thus to Rendra it is better that the rural villages are to be developed first. In his poem, “*Sajak Sebotol Bir*” [ Poem of a bottle of beer ], Rendra provocatively asks and reiterates the points he made earlier:

The entertainment of one night in a big city

Equals with the development expenditure of ten villages  
 What kind of civilization that we are defending?  
 Why do we build the metropolitan city  
 And forgotten of the civilization in the country  
 Why development directs into hoarding  
 And never on distributing?

Here the metropolitan city does not grow from industry  
 But from the import demands of the industrialised nation  
 For our market and natural resources  
 The metropolitan city here  
 Is the instrument of accumulation for Europe, Japan, China, America  
 Australia, and other industrial countries

Where are the roads of the past  
 Which linked one village with another  
 Now abandoned  
 Becoming lanes and potholes  
 ...  
 The roads that are especially built  
 Are not for peasants  
 But for the middle traders and its predatory agents<sup>22</sup>

Another Indonesian writer, Mohamad Sobary, wrote an equally moving essay, titled “*Tetangga Kita*” [Our Neighbour]. Poor neighbours are noisy and can be irritating, but they are less harmful than rich ones. Living with the latter can be more serene, but we need to be wary that as they easily want to expand their compound, and they can do many things to get it! What he observed the rich neighbour would eventually force the poor to move out, as they are in need of more land for their own. In his cynical tone, Sobary writes: “The poor are deemed not suitable to live in strategic areas. They must live in faraway places. Moreover, they are deemed as not deserving to be the neighbour of the rich. They are seen to pollute the surrounding. Truly arrogant our [rich] neighbours! Indeed. But we are not allowed to be frustrated. We could not protest. We are expected to accept this as part of the concrete reality of the neighbourhood life in Jakarta.”<sup>23</sup> He likened the arrogance of the rich with that of the ruling government:

The arrogance of the rich around us seems similar to the arrogance of the government.

The rich and the government are always in collusion. They shared the same aspiration. Especially the aspiration in the plans to evict the homes of the poor so that new buildings that is more cosy and profitable can be built.<sup>24</sup>

To the people, he reminds of their rights, and always be wary of the claim that the land acquisitions are made, and this he expressed in cynical tone:

How could the eviction being carried out? Is it not that our rights are protected and made supreme? Actually it should be. But in reality, the rights in regards to those are easily taken away. The government always has the coercive power. We are always in fear when we are told that we stayed in the land illegally meant for public good. We know that what is “public” meant for the tiny circle who are extraordinarily rich. But we are made to believe that the “public” is what it actually meant to be. We can not agree, as we live in a democratic world. We are free to have diversified views. But if our rich neighbour (those who work on their own or with the government) want to evict us, there seem only one alternative, that is we have to give way!<sup>25</sup>

### **7. Not just the Poor, but the Flora and Fauna**

The urban deterioration not only caused human suffering but also other flora and fauna. The city expansion affects not just human living conditions but also its “original inhabitants,” such as the monkeys, who are now in competition with human as their forested home are cleared for development. Similarly, many centuries old trees have to make way. The destruction of a banyan tree in the city, in the name of urban development is captured melancholically by Usman Awang, the most eloquent and humanistic Malaysian literary laureate. “Pohon Berigin” (Banyan Tree) which is regarded as a sacred tree in this part of the world, always being a host for many living beings, man and animals, has no meaning in the new city landscape:

The old banyan at the corner of the road  
 In a newly capital city  
 Hundred of years it stands  
 Recepting the shine sheltering the earth  
 Birds flying and chirping  
 It is their house, where the happy family is homed  
 The butterflies chasing each other merrily  
 The children playing under its wide canopy<sup>26</sup>

The banyan whispers as the breeze blew: “My name is Banyan the old abandoned tree,

being targeted as enemy by a planning named “Pembangunan.”<sup>27</sup> In “A Letter of the Bird Community to the Mayor” Usman poetically penned:

The city inhabitants have destroyed the green nature  
 All in the name of pursuing the green dollar  
 Since the mud of the city has turned into concrete  
 We, the bird community has become the victim of silence

The bird protest and appeal to the Mayor:

We appeal to your wisdom  
 Please conserve every budding and stemming plants  
 Every leaves, flower petals and bushes  
 That is our home, our heritage  
 Indeed for the welfare of humankind  
 For his health, happiness and serenity  
 The nature promises a thousand blossoming  
 Under the sun’s rays.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, Usman Awang, in the Malaysian literary scene, was one of the vocal and persistent critic against the neglect, marginalization and injustices against the poor, both rural and urban.<sup>29</sup> It is not too far fetch to say that the power of words as articulated in the literary and reflective pieces can be more persuasive than the disciplined academic pieces. The organic intelligentsia, especially the literary circles, wrote pieces that have an equal in tenacity, if not more than those uttered by academic scholars, green environmentalists and activists. An engaging literary works, problematizing these issues of the dehumanized city and its environs, and its inhabitants should be part of our educative consciousness to make this urban living more humane and humanized.

Today, our city centres are series of mega malls, with premier hotels and condos, often priding itself as the commercial and financial hubs. The globalized economy, centred on the interest of the industrialised West, is couched as cosmopolitanism, with ample facilities and spaces reserved for the foreign capital and expatriates to occupy the city’s civic centres as their enclave. Only with this, the title of a cosmopolitan city is accorded, with city authorities busied to host a list of international fiestas and galas, while the city’s majority poor are simply not part of it, nor are welcomed. Moreover for the city’s inhabitants, especially its working class, the public spaces are diminishing, as more parcel of land in the city turned into commercial and private areas. Even in our city neighbourhood parcels of land, used to be the

playground for our local children, have been tendered out for building of more condominiums and commercial spaces. In all, the way the city being constructed is meant for the privileged few: "... Many sections of the old city and squatter areas are being cleared for major road improvement schemes and the construction of tall buildings and other commercial usages. The urban development schemes inevitably benefit only the car owner, the landlord and business corporation at the expense of the underprivileged."<sup>30</sup>

The building of the city cannot be solely in the hands of the privileged few, unless we have no qualms to allow for economic and class apartheid to be part of urban life. Today, many young Asian intelligentsia are travelling more widely throughout the globe have many things to share about their thrilling experiences to visit or study in many Euro-American, Japanese and Australian cities. Those cities are deemed as the paragon of progress, refinement, sophistication and good living. But many have no interest to know, nor to visit, other Asian cities, unless these are places for good shopping bargain. Many want to see only "the First World" in the Asian cities, with no or little interest to peep into the actual "Third World" in Asian cities, or even the "Third World" in the First World cities. In the world of scholarship we have yet to see a stream of interest of fellow Asian to study another Asian or Third World societies. Hence the universities in the Third World countries must be prepared to devise and explore studies on development, urban redevelopment, the plight of the urban poor, and sustainability. Moreover these concepts need to be scrutinized, and to assume its universal validity and applicability can be naïve.

To simply illustrate or describe the degrading urban slums, is not enough. We need to have an equal interest on what is to be done for them. What is more important to be taken up is: "why and what are the reasons that they have to go through such degrading living condition? Some social scientists, with all seriousness in their work, avoid such basic question, often in the name to be "objective", and it obviously needs to be challenged. In sum, we need to see from the lens of the migrant poor, that the city is a mecca hope for them, coming to the cities in search of a better life, to escape the rural poverty, landlessness and sheer neglect of the agricultural sector and low productivity. We cannot continue to be busied with telling all about the city, yet silent on the predicaments of its inhabitants, especially the downtrodden.<sup>31</sup> We equally need to scrutinize the development policies and visions of the ruling elite, such as the latter's biasedness in directing the development planning. The elites' propensity to focus development in the urban areas was partly aimed at strengthening their power base, or even their ignorance of the needs of the rural and urban masses. To reiterate our point, the usage of Fanon's expression "the wretched of the [earth /city]" is not simply depicting the state of affairs but also a commitment for liberation, that this dehumanized condition must be put to an end, however difficult it is.<sup>32</sup> Our concern for their plight cannot be simply an academic one, for our human responsibility cannot be just a theoretical commitment but a concrete action. A

short symbolic anecdote by a mystic Jamaluddin Rumi (1207-1273) is apt for our reflection: "Last night the Sheikh went all about the city, lamp in hand, crying, "I am weary of beast and devil, a human being is my desire." The search for a humane living city should be our desire and will.

### Notes

- 1 Soejipto Wirosardjono, "Gelandangan dan Pilihan Kebijaksanaan Penanggulangan," in *Gelandangan, Pandangan Ilmuan Sosial*. (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1984), p 66.
- 2 Parsudi Suparlan, "The Gelandangan of Jakarta: Politics among the Poorest People in the Capital of Indonesia," *Indonesia*, No.18 (oct. 1974), pp.41-52.
- 3 David criticizes the dominant scholarship, which in my opinion an apt observation on Southeast Asian context: "Social scientists concerned with the study of urban poor may be classified into two: (1) those who peer into their lives with the same fascination as one studying a newly-discovered cultural minority, and (2) those who study them for the practical purpose of designing and programming their lives and their eviction. The former are sometimes called culture-of-poverty (COP) researchers, while the latter are usually referred to as development planners. In their own separate ways, both contribute to the further oppression of the poor." "The Sociology of Poverty or the Poverty of Sociology," in Nancy Chng (ed.) *Questioning development in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Published by Select Books on behalf of Southeast Asia Study Group, 1977), p. 77.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.83.
- 5 Soedjatmoko, "Perceptions of Social Justice," in Nancy Chng (ed.) *Questioning development in Southeast Asia*, p.94.
- 6 *Ibid.*,
- 7 Stanislav Andreski, *Parasitism and Subversion: The Case of Latin America*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), p.7.
- 8 Ismail Hussein, "The New Malaysian Literature-A View," in *Bahasa, kesusasteraan dan kebudayaan Melayu : essei-essei penghormatan kepada pendita Za'ba*. (Kuala Lumpur : Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan, 1976), pp. 369-381 ; Ungku Maimunah Mohd Tahir, *Modern Malay literary culture : a historical perspective*. (Singapore : Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1987).
- 9 Malay literature, according to Ismail Hussein as an expression of the working class Malays in the urban centres, in contrast to the classical Malay literature that was born from within the aristocratic milieu.
- 10 Atmakusmah (ed.) *Moctar Lubis, Wartawan Jihad*. (Jakarta: Kompas, 1992). p. 341.



- 11 Muhammad Ali, "Gadis Kecil di Simpang Sepi," cited in Ajip Rosidi, *Kapankah Kesusasteraan Indonesia Lahir?* (Jakarta: Gunung Agung, 1985), p. 124.
- 12 This brings us to a point noted by W.F. Wertheim, on the elites' perception on the masses. "It is possible that elite members actually are ignorant of the living conditions of the masses and consequently believe their own stereotypes." Wertheim "Elite Perceptions and the Masses," in *Comparative Essays on Asia and the West* (Amsterdam : VU University Press, 1993), p.58.
- 13 A Samas Said, *Salina*. (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1961).
- 14 Harun Aminurrashid, *Simpang Perinang*. (Singapore: Pustaka Melayu, 1966).
- 15 Mohamed Latiff Mohamed, *Kota Airmata*. (Singapore: Penerbitan Solo Enterprise, 1977).
- 16 Baha Zain, "The City's Exile," in *Postponing Truth and Other Poems*. (KL:DBP, 2008), p. 143.
- 17 Hadijah Rahmat, *Kilat Senja: Sejarah Sosial dan Budaya Kampung-kampung di Singapura*. (Singapore: HS Yang, 2005), Her research documents a classic case of how villagers in the eastern part of Singapore were evicted from their village by the state who claim that the land needed to build hospital. Eventually the land becomes an area developed for private properties.
- 18 Muhammad Haji Muhd Taib, *The New Malay*. (Petaling Jaya : Visage Communication, 1996).
- 19 Soedjatmoko, "Lingkungan Hidup Manusia, Nilai-nilai dan Pendidikan," in *Menjadi Bangsa Terdidik Menurut Soedjatmoko*. (Jakarta: Kompas, 2010).
- 20 Goenawan Mohamad, *Conversations with Difference: Essays from Tempo Magazine*. (Jakarta: Tempo, 2002), pp. 169-171.
- 21 Rendra, "Kota "Kasur Tua," in *Catatan-catatan Rendra Tahun 1960-an* . (Bekasi Selatan: Penerbit Burung Merak, 2005), p. 108.
- 22 Rendra, *Potret Pembangunan dalam Puisi*. (Jakarta Timur: Burung Merak Press, 2008), pp. 42-44.
- 23 Mohamad Sobary, *Moralitas Kaum Pinggiran*. (Bandung: Penerbit Mizan, 1994), p.115.
- 24 Ibid., p.115.
- 25 Ibid., p.116.
- 26 Usman Awang, "Balada Terbunuhnya Beringin Tua di Pinggir Sebuah Bandaraya," in *Puisi-puisi Pilihan Sasterawan Negara Usman Awang*. (KL: DBP, 1987), p. 31.
- 27 Ibid., p. 31.
- 28 Ibid., pp. 36-7.
- 29 Siti Zainon Ismail, "Denyut Alam Sekitar dan Pembangunan Kota Tinjauan Nilai Kemanusiaan dan Sinisme Budaya Puisi Usman Awang," in *Menyirat Inspirasi*. (eds.) Ahmad Kamal Abdullah & Shapiai Muhammad Ramly. (Johor Bahru: YWJ Citra Holdings 2011).
- 30 William S.W. Lim, *An Alternative Urban Strategy*. (Singapore : DP Architects, 1980), pp. 176-177.
- 31 Robbie B.H. Goh, Brenda S.A. Yeoh, *Theorizing the Southeast Asian city as text : urban landscapes, cultural documents, and interpretative experiences*. (Singapore : World Scientific, 2003).
- 32 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove Press, 1963).