

Nazry Bahrawi. “Indonesia's perantau: A theory of archipelagic flaneurship in the Indian Ocean”

Walter Benjamin's theory of the flâneur has been taken as the archetypal frame of the critic of urban modernity. Yet, it does not quite capture the nuances and contexts of urban spaces of the non-West, such as the Nusantara spheres in the Indian Ocean world. Responding to Revathi Krishnaswamy's call for literary scholars to articulate non-Western poetics as a counter to Western high theory, this paper will theorise the alternative frame of the 'perantau', a literary trope distilled from the travel fiction of Haji Abdul Malik Karim Abdullah, or Hamka, an influential Indonesia cultural figure and prolific writer whose works of fiction and treatises on Islamic theology published between 1920s and 1960s are still widely read in Indonesia today. By engaging with his novels *The Sinking of Van Der Wjick* (1938) and *Director, Sir* (1939), this paper will investigate how Hamka introduces and develops the archetypal character of the perantau (or, the island-hopper) in his realist novels, fashioning it into the Nusantara equivalent of the flâneur as a “keen observer and critic of urban life” to paraphrase Benjamin. It will argue that the island-hopping culture of Indonesians articulated through Hamka's travel fiction produces the idea of Indonesia's thousand islands as a 'world unto itself' – an archipelagic concept that challenges our normative understanding of urbanism, diaspora and utopia. Finally, a qualification. Given that both novels are written in Bahasa Indonesia, English translation of the relevant excerpts will be provided by me.