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“You cannot avoid living in God - it’s there. You can feel it in the trees.”

Goenawan Mohamad

Indonesian poet, essayist and reluctant journalist Goenawan Mohamad spoke today of God and trees in a discussion on his literary career today at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. “You cannot avoid living in God - it’s there. You can feel it in the trees,” he said.

“It’s the ultimate concern of people, God. The world is becoming more and more obsessed with religion and God is easily used or misused.”

Mohamad’s poetry often evokes imagery of trees and nature, which he sees as linked to faith.

“Trees help you to live and the damage done to trees is really serious, especially in Indonesia. We have the biggest rainforest being destroyed. When you grow a tree it has life. Some people say you can talk to trees - I don’t.”

Faith is the central theme in his poetry collection, *On God and Other Unfinished Things*.

“When you write poetry you feel the presence of things - spiritual or material - but things. God speaks through those things. When you write poetry you touch those things.”

“So God is an audience, God is a reader?” chair Alan Bett asked to Mohamad’s amusement. “No, I don’t think he reads my things,” he laughed. As well as his extensive poetry work, the veteran political activist writes a weekly magazine column, *Sidelines* - despite finding journalism “boring”. “Poetry is like crime - it doesn’t pay,” he explained.

Mohamad has in fact been making a living from journalism for decades, fighting against censorship from the Indonesian government, a pressure which he explained has lessened. He reflected on how difficult it had been to work as a journalist under oppressive circumstances.

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“It was terrible - when you’re an editor and your paper is banned, many people lose jobs. It’s like a pilot and a plane with a hijacker behind your back threatening with a bomb to blow up the plane and you have to negotiate. It’s very difficult psychologically, morally.”

He also warned that although censorship may have improved in his home country, the threats to good journalism continue: “So-called post truth is very dangerous and has an insidious result everywhere.”

Some of Mohamad’s prose and poetry has been translated into English and, he spoke of how he sees the translations as separate pieces of work.

“I don’t check the original. There is no original. It doesn’t have to be exact or accurate, it’s different. Imagery is very much a localised thing, it cannot be translated from one place to another. I don’t try to read the English version, it’s disconcerting. But it makes me a little more famous.”