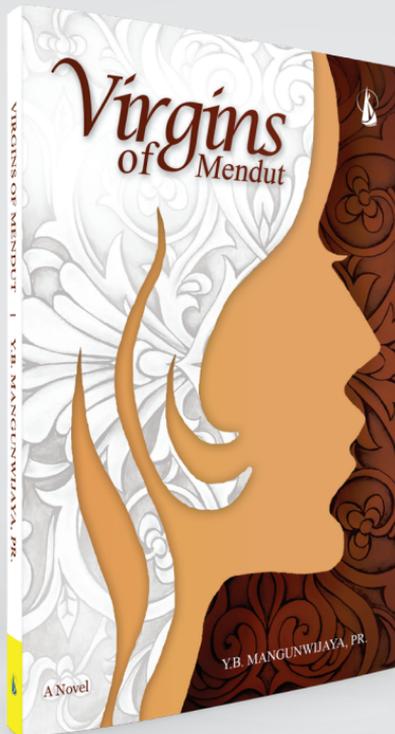




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# The Ballad of Mendut School Girls

**V***irgins of Mendut* marks Mangunwijaya's yet another phenomenal work. The main character of the novel, Maria Yohanna Sudarmi or Hanna, happened to be his grandmother. She went to Mendut school for girls where the story took place. The novel is based on the author's grandmother's life being one of the girls in Mendoet

school. The details are based on the written sources compiled in HALLO MENDOET magazine, neatly archived to this day. Despite being a historical novel, the fictitious elements are very strong in this novel. It's worth analyzing whether the fictional elements obscure the historical facts or accentuate them instead.

*Historical romance documents monumental events in a person's life. VIRGINS OF MENDUT is a little effort to "immortalize" a certain golden period during the initial struggle of the Catholic Church to gain roots in Indonesia. This novel is full of vibrancy of teenage giddiness, as well as the bitter-sweet process of transition from the colonial time to a modern era: highlighting the identity of Catholic congregation in the midst of society and the Republic of Indonesia nation state.*

This novel is rife with symbols, meaning, interpretation, and imagination, despite the incomplete presentation of the historical data. This little flaw should not downgrade this novel as a historical literary masterpiece. Although full of symbolic language and places, and meaningful chain of events, the novel is greatly readable and compelling.

It is obvious why *Virgins of Mendut* was a best-selling historical romance of its time and why Mangunwijaya chose to put Mendut and the girls on the spotlight. Raised and educated as a Mendut school alumnae, Darmi has developed a very strong sense of militancy in the hands of strict Dutch educators and nuns. The richness of Dutch influence is evident in the quotes of Dutch songs or expressions in the code-mixed and code-switched dialogues among the

characters in the novel. The lively and linguistically rich conversations prove that, historically, deep-rooted Dutch-styled education was adopted at that period. It is amazing to know how intellectually advanced the Indonesian people were at that time. Dutch was the second language being widely spoken to communicate and to express their ideas. Dutch phrases are ubiquitous in the novel, as seen in the following quote:

*By the shore of Elo river  
Lies Mendut hermitage school  
There, by the hands of the Dutch nuns  
Many Javanese girls were educated.*

*Aan de oever van de Elo  
Staat het klooster van Mendut.  
Daar zijn veel Javaanse meisjes  
Door de Zusters opgevoed.*

The Dutch song implies the strict and strong educational style promoted by the Dutch educators. The educational style proves to be very credible to equip the students to face future challenges. Mangunwijaya hints that the educational style used to train young girls was successful, at least as experienced by his grandmother, Maria Yohanna Sudarmi, the main character of the novel.

Mendut is a small village by the side of Elo river. Despite its small size, Mendut is rich in historical monuments. In addition to the world-famous majestic Mendut temple, the Catholic boarding school adds to the historical value of Mendut village. Located near the Mendut temple, the beautiful Catholic Boarding School for Girls and a majestic Church were established in 1908. The boarding school was home for hundreds of

female students of Mendut all-girl school, ranging from Kindergarten, *Hollandsch-Inlandsche School* or Elementary School, a high school, and a *kweekschool* or equivalent to a school for teachers. Mendut in the past was not only well-known for the all-girl education and boarding school, but it was also known as the first-generation Catholic families who became the backbones of the Catholic faith proselytization throughout Java.

*Virgins of Mendut*, based on the true historical accounts of former students of Mendut Girl School, tells about Grandma Darmi and her granddaughter Rukmi. These two cross-generational women are both concerned with women's education. Grandma Darmi recounts her experiences being sent off to live in Mendut boarding school as a child to be raised and educated by strict Dutch nuns. She

narrates the dormitory life with its ups and downs during the pre-independence period, which was very much like a dorm life in the modern time. Mangunwijaya adds light-hearted humor and quick-witted bantering between the characters on mundane matters of the time to the narrative. These authentic exchanges captivate the readers, as in the story of the nickname given to Sister Pancratia. Being unable to pronounce her name well, the children dubbed her “Nyah Pang.” Each teacher deserves one affectionate nickname secretly shared by the children in the dormitory.

*Forgive me, Nyah Pang, er, my most sincere apology, Sister Pancratia, forgive me for failing to recognize you; I thought I saw Michael the Archangel. I didn't realize it was you, Nyah Pang, er, Sister Pancratia.*

Grandma Darmi recounts her childhood experiences spent with her family, in the dormitory, and after leaving Mendut. Upon graduation, she has to leave the dormitory life full of surprises and excitement and must live outside the dorm. One signature element of the storytelling told brilliantly by Mangunwijaya is that of correspondence. The good communication between Grandma Darmi, the former dormitory caretakers, and the former students of Mendut dormitory is established well. They still keep in touch through correspondence. Their exchanges of letters are accentuated in the last chapter where Grandma Darmi reads the school magazine called HALLO MENDOET. The magazine and letters from her friends allow her to go down the memory lane of wonderful moments in Mendut.

As for Rukmi, a girl living in the modern post-colonial era, she lives exuberantly and pursues her study in the Netherlands. Getting full support from Grandma Darmi, Rukmi makes the best use of the opportunity. One of Grandma Darmi's best friends, Oma Yo, lives in the Netherlands and welcomes Rukmi warmly and cordially into her family. Oma Yo loves and cares for Rukmi like her own flesh and blood as she reminds Oma Yo of Grandma Darmi during their school days.

The overlapping stories of these two cross-generational women are superbly interwoven in a tapestry with one captivating connecting thread. Grandma Darmi spent her old days recapturing memories of her life in Mendut boarding school as a powerless innocent pupil against the world. Her granddaughter, Rukmi, experiences similar struggles when she studies in the Netherlands,

the land of windmills, to pursue her dreams. The connecting thread intersecting the grandmother-granddaughter stories is Oma Yo, who appears from the middle to the end of the novel. Darmi's humility has given Oma Yo strength and courage to embrace her own impending death. Reconnecting with the past and recapturing memories of her old days help Oma Yo to finally come to the stage of acceptance and submission. The arduous and laborious training during her school days in Mendut has shaped her strong character to withstand anything, including death.

This historical novel that Mangunwijaya pens marvelously does not describe history in a scientific way. After all, this is a work of fiction, albeit inspired by a true story of real-life people. Understandably enough, it contains strengths and weaknesses. The author

has brilliantly created symbolic characters and circumstances signifying a variety of personal traits, which requires creative storytelling to do so in a fiction writing. Apparently, Mangunwijaya earns kudos for doing it so well. Readers will be mesmerized and inspired by the characters' personal traits through the dynamic storytelling of the characters and events in the novel.

One message inferred from the novel is the historical track record of how the Dutch nuns looked at Indonesia (back then), and did what they could to contribute their ability, creativity, and efforts to build the Indonesian people stronger and better intellectually through the education system. This is the critical historical side of the novel.

*Sister Higinia was the greatest tailor. What are you sewing in Heaven, Sister? Oh, great. Amazing. Sister*

*Higinia is sewing countries at war together so they may live peacefully and harmoniously. Bravo! Great job, Sister!*

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### **About the Author**

Yusuf Bilyarta Mangunwijaya, Pr (1929–1999). He was graduated from the Philosophy of Theology Institute of Yogyakarta in 1959, and was graduated from the School of Engineering -Rhein-Westfalen, Aachen, Germany in 1966. In 1978 he followed a Fellow of Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, Aspen, USA. Many of his writings have been published as books, and many of his articles have been published in various media. His book entitled Literature and Religiosity won the first prize of the Jakarta Arts Council for essay category, in 1982. While the Manyar Birds won the South East Asia White Award 1983. Some of his books are translated in Dutch, English, and Japanese.

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## PT KANISIUS

Jl. Cempaka 9 Deresan,  
Caturtunggal, Depok, Sleman,  
Yogyakarta 55281, INDONESIA

Phone: +62 274 588783

Fax: +62 274 563349

E-mail: [office@kanisiusmedia.co.id](mailto:office@kanisiusmedia.co.id)

[flora@kanisiusmedia.co.id](mailto:flora@kanisiusmedia.co.id) (Rights Representative)

[www.kanisiusmedia.co.id](http://www.kanisiusmedia.co.id)