Ethnicity and the performance of identity

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ABSTRACT
This essay looks into the novels of two Indonesian women writers, *Perempuan Kembang Jepun* (Lan Fang 2009) and *Dimsum terakhir* (Clara Ng 2006), which depict the struggles of the major female characters in negotiating their “hybrid” identities amidst the pulls from various opposing forces that try to impose and define their identities. Both works were published in the post-New Order Indonesia, where identity politics seems to dominate the political and cultural realms. Both Lan Fang and Clara Ng try to problematize the rigid and monolithic sense of cultural identity that had been inculcated by the previous regime through its aggressive assimilation policy and imposition of the state ideology of unity. The essay aims at examining different strategies employed by both authors in redefining identity through approaches that see identity as a fluid, non-essentialist, and on-going process rather than a given entity or label that can be simply inscribed on individuals.

KEYWORDS
Women writers, cultural identity, post-New Order Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION
As a post-colonial nation consisting of over three hundred indigenous ethnic groups, Indonesia has witnessed a series of ethnic conflicts and tensions during the six decades since independence from colonial powers. Ethnic conflict is especially rife since the Reformasi of 1998 as a result of the loosening grip of a central government that had been authoritarian in nature for over thirty years. As the country’s economy crumbled in 1997-1998, the Suharto regime lost its political legitimacy, and demands for more autonomy in the provinces could no longer be ignored. Ethno-nationalist sentiments that were dormant for years were reawakened during the tumultuous first five years of the Reformasi, as became apparent in several violent conflicts between various ethnic groups,