

## Remarks from the President of Universitas Sanata Dharma

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Distinguished keynote speakers, participants, presenters, and members of the Committee.

Greetings, and a very warm welcome to you all.

It is my joy and privilege to welcome all of you to the Literary Studies Conference 2025 in collaboration with the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment in ASEAN (ASLEASEAN), which takes up an crucially engaging theme: "Literary Narratives, Climate Change, and Social Inequality: ASEAN Perspectives." This theme is so timely, responding to one of the most urgent, complex, and challenging crises of our time, namely climate change. Given its complexity, any adequate response to it has to be interdisciplinary. By inviting literary creativities, this Conference would be contributing to the creation of new narratives that we urgently need. For, one of our biggest problems today is the loss of common narrative in responding to this crisis. The narrative of progress that modernity has provided us has lost its credibility. Limitless progress proves to be both impossible in terms of the limits of planetary resources, and dangerously self-destructive. This idea of limitless progress and growth has brought us to the brink of ecological collapse and planetary crisis. The situation is getting worse because we lack a common narrative. Bruno Latour has gone even further by saying that our situation is marked by "epistemological delirium", we no longer know how to think correctly about our situation and existential predicament (Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, 2018).

That is why the climate change ecological crisis needs a new common narrative framework that engages us on a deeper level of thinking about our precarious existence. And it is time that Asia functions as a critical context from which this common narrative springs up. It is time that Asian thinkers engage the world from their own context to address this crisis. One of the avenues is to weave a critical narrative from Asian historical engagement with modernity and the West. On this point, Amitav Ghosh, one of the leading Asian writers, has argued that the roots of the problem of climate change that we are facing today go back to the centuries-old geopolitical order constructed by European colonialism. Ghosh offers a critical historical narrative of the climate crisis that is centered around the trade of nutmeg. Here, the context of Southeast Asian, and Indonesian archipelago in particular, is rather prominent. In the dynamics that would become a colonial history, the history of the nutmeg trade is marked by violent conquest and exploitation of both human life and the natural environment (Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, 2021). The story of the nutmeg becomes a parable for our ecological crisis. It shows in painful ways how human history has always been marked by inequality in terms of power relations; and that this power relations always involve earthly materials and resources, such as coffee, spices, tea, sugarcane, opium, and fossil fuels, that have deep and longer lasting impacts on our physical environment. Similar to Bruno Latour's view, for Ghosh, our crisis is ultimately the

result of a mechanistic view of the earth, which is so prevalent in modernity, in which nature exists only as a resource for humans to use for our own ends, rather than a force of its own, full of agency and meaning. We know that the end result of this worldview is exploitation and deep inequality.

So, we need to shift our epistemology and build a new narrative. We need to move from instrumentalization of nature to respecting the natural world; from exploiting nature to living together with and in nature; from colonialism to a better politics that brings our lives down to earth (Latour), going beyond narrow politics that has been mostly concerned with the national and the global in the traditional sense of the word.

This integral understanding of the relationship between the natural and the humans is found in many of indigenous Asian cultural traditions; and the better understanding of politics that cares deeply about the cosmos is being constructed by new cultural forces that need support from scholars from various disciplines and their academic communities. Here at Sanata Dharma University, we are convinced that ecological crisis is fundamentally related to the much deeper crisis of humanity; and that ecological concerns cannot be separated from social concerns and problems, such as inequality, injustice, poverty, migrations and so forth. Following Pope Francis, we also believe that a technocratic solution is never enough. We need to come together for an integral approach to ecology, in which new narratives of values and visions are so much needed.

As scholars, working from an Asian context, we are better situated to address this global crisis of ecology together. More particularly, literary studies should play a more distinctive role in this interdisciplinary endeavour by engaging the diversity of Asian (or ASEAN) contexts more creatively, with fresh methodologies and frameworks, and thus contributing transformative narratives for the world.

So, finally, I wish you all a very stimulating and thought-provoking conference. On behalf of the whole academic community of Sanata Dharma University, I would like to offer our gratitude to all the speakers, presenters, moderators, participants, and members of the Committee who have worked so hard with a sense of dedication and collaboration to make this Conference a reality.

God bless us all in our endeavor.  
Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam.

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