

Pramoedya ananta toer, his life and his literary achievements



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Chapter 2: Pramoedya Ananta Toer, his life and his literary achievements

The account of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's life and literary achievements, and the summary of his novel *Bumi Manusia* are mostly based on A. Teuuw's book *Citra Manusia Indonesia dalam Karya Sastra: Pramoedya Ananta Toer* (1997: 1-55), Schultz and Felter's article, *History, Education, and Nationalism in Pramoedya Toer's Buru Quartet* (2002), Dwi Elyono's unpublished dissertation of the Australian National University *Harry Aveling's and Willem Samuels' Translations of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Novel Gadis Pantai: A Study of the factors, purposes, methods and effects of literary translation* (2006: 34-40), and two journal articles by GoGwilt entitled *Pramoedya's Fiction and History: An Interview With Indonesian Novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer* (1996) and *The Vanishing Genre of the Nyai Narrative: Reading Genealogies of English and Indonesian Modernism* (2007).

2. 1 The Literary Achievements of Pramoedya Ananta Toer

Pramoedya Ananta Toer (6 February 1925-30 April 2006) was a leading Indonesian writer who was internationally renowned for his literary works which dwell on themes of social justice and humanity. He had written more than fifty novels, short stories, essays, social critiques and histories of which the majority have been translated into over 36 languages. He had collected more than a dozen international awards and had been frequently nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature since 1981. He was also an important figure in Indonesian literature, " an exponent of ' universal humanism', the liberal and individualistic cultural ideology of the loose association of writers, artists and intellectuals often referred to as the ' Gelanggang group' or the '

Angkatan 45', the generation of the revolution" (as cited in Foulcher, 2008: 1).

The exceptional quality of Pramoedya's novels lies in his power as a storyteller to re-create the historical scene for the present audience. In a statement by the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, Pramoedya's novels "[illuminate] with brilliant stories the historical awakening and modern experience of the Indonesian people" (as quoted in a book entitled *Polemik Hadiah Magsaysay*, 1997: 212-13). In Pramoedya's interview with GoGwilt about the English translation of the Buru tetralogy, he emphasized the importance of historical settings in his novels as well as the complex relation between history and personal biography (GoGwilt, 1996). Considering the historical scope of his work, his novels are also regarded as a typical example of post-colonial literature in South East Asia. One particular characteristic of this literature is the actual historical setting, which describes the diverse culture and language environment and its role in creating social difference within zones of colonial contact (cf. see Niekerk, 2003 and Errington, 2008). Pramoedya was often compared to many great authors of the Western literature - Camus, Tolstoy and Gorky, to name a few. The historical scope of his novels suggests an affinity with the great historical novels of nineteenth-century Europe, particularly in the context of socialist-realism in literature, in terms of narrative style and content. The story deals with themes of universal humanism such as freedom of expression, power struggle, racism and social injustice (see Kurniawan, 1999; GoGwilt, 1996).

In general, Pramoedya's novels and short stories cover four different periods, spanning the period of Singasari and Majapahit kingdoms (1300-1600) (e. g. Arok Dedesand Arus Balik), the pre-independence period under the Dutch colonial rule at the end of 19th century (e. g. Buru Quartet, The Fugitive), the the Japanese occupation period under the Japanese in Indonesia during WWII (e. g. Perawan Remaja dalam Cengkeraman Militer), and the post-independence period of Soekarno's (e. g. Corruption, The History of the Overseas Chinese in Indonesia) and Soeharto's (e. g. The Girl from the Coast and A Mute's Soliloquy) regimes. The blunt criticism of the ruling government contained in some of Pramoedya's works had caused him several periods of imprisonment under different government administrations.

- Some some of the international awards conferred upon him Pramodya include the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award in 1988, the Wertheim Award, in 1992, the controversial Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature, and Creative Communication Arts in 1995, .

- the UNESCO Madanjeet Singh Prize in 1996 and the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres République of France in 2000.

2. 2 The life of Pramoedya Ananta Toer

Pramoedya Ananta Toer was born in a the small town of Blora, in the Province of Central Java, Indonesia, as the firstborn of eight siblings. His father, Mastoer, was a strong nationalist who took part in the Indonesian struggle for independence from the Dutch colonial rule and worked as a headmaster in a school under Boedi Oetomo Institute of Education, the first political native political organization in the Dutch East Indies (today's

Republic of Indonesia). His mother, Oemi Saidah, was born from an aristocratic Javanese family. She was a full-time housewife who later took the role of the main breadwinner for her family when her husband's school was closed due to the oppression of the Dutch colonial government. His parents, particularly his mother, had a great influence in formulating his idealized image of the Indonesian people, which was reflected in most of his works.

After spending his childhood in his home, Pramoedya went to the Radio Vocational School in Surabaya, but and had almost graduated when the Japanese invaded the city on the last day of the school's final examination period. During the Japanese occupation period he worked as a typist for the Japanese news agency Domei in Jakarta, where he met and built relations with many outstanding figures in Indonesian history. Having felt that he was treated unfairly, Pramoedya decided to escape from his work with the Japanese. In October 1945 he joined a paramilitary force known as Badan Keamanan Rakyat (BKR) in Cikampek (West Java) after the proclamation of Indonesian independence. During this time he began to write short stories and novels and also translated a several books from J. Veth, Frits van Raalte and Lode Zielens. His first major novel, *Perburuan* (The Fugitive), was completed during two years of captivity by the Dutch government in the Bukit Duri prison, Jakarta.

During the first two decades of Indonesian independence, from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, Pramoedya became a renowned figure in Indonesian literature. This had broadened his social contacts especially in the world of literature and the arts. With time, these contacts contributed to his new perspective in politics and ideology. Several cultural exchanges, <https://assignbuster.com/pramoedya-ananta-toer-his-life-and-his-literary-achievements/>

including trips to the Netherlands, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, had opened his mind to the world's political situation at that time. However, the most important event for Pramoedya at that time would be his short trip to China in 1956. This visit seemed to have sparked his interest in Marxist ideology, an apparent reason of for his decision later on to join Lekra (People's Cultural Insitute), a leftist organization, in 1958. From then on, Pramoedya became more active in politics. His writing style became more politically driven, as evidenced in the publication of a book which contains the correspondence he had with an imaginary Chinese discussing the history of the Indonesian Chinese, *Hoa Kiau di Indonesia* (History of the Overseas Chinese in Indonesia). It specifically criticized the government's instruction at that time which banned the Chinese minority in Indonesia to do business in rural areas, forcing them to close down their businesses or hand them over to the local natives and relocate to urban areas. This created friction between him and Soekarno's government and caused his detention at the Cipinang prison for nine months. Nonetheless, Pramoedya continued to build up his reputation as a literary and social critic, writing in various newspapers and literary journals, translating several literary works which were mostly came from Russian authors including Leo Tolstoi, Mikhail Sholokhov, Maxim Gorky, Aleksandr Kuprin and publishing a book about the history of the nationalist movements in Indonesia. In 1962-1965 he worked as an editor of *Lentera*, the weekly cultural edition of the left-wing newspaper *Bintang Timur*, where he published many articles on Indonesian history and literature around 1900-1920. He was also a lecturer of Indonesian language and literature at the University of Res Publica and was a founder of the "Multatuli" Language and Literature Academy in 1963.

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In October 1965 he was again put behind bars due to his association with Lekra, the cultural and literary institute affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party as the organization which was alleged to be responsible for an attempted coup with the assassination of several senior generals of the Indonesian military. This bloody event ended Soekarno's political career and marked the transition of power to Suharto's "New Order" regime. After this incident, Pramoedya's books were banned in Indonesia and he was arrested as a political prisoner without trial in the penal colony of Buru Island from 1965-1979. During this period, he composed the first two parts of the famous Buru Quartet (Bumi Manusia/This Earth of Mankind and Anak Semua Bangsa/Child of All Nations) but did not have the opportunity to write it down. They were originally meant as a semi-biographical work of Tirta Adhie Soerjo, a nationalist figure and the founder of Sarekat Islam, the first native organization in Indonesia.

After Pramoedya was released from prison, he remained was placed under house arrest in Jakarta until 1992. During this time period he completed the last two parts of the Buru Quartet: Jejak Langkah (1985; Footsteps) and Rumah Kaca (1990; House of Glass), which instantly became best-sellers in Indonesia and gained him an international recognition. Unfortunately, ten months later these books were banned by the government as subversive materials which contained Marxist-Leninist ideology. In spite of these hardships, he continued to write other great novels such as Gadis Pantai (The Girl from the Coast) in 1982, a semi-fictional novel which portrayed his grandmother's life; Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu (A Mute's Soliloquy) in 1995, a personal biography based on the collection of letters that he wrote for to

his daughter during his imprisonment in Buru, which were but was not allowed to send; and *Arus Balik* in 1995, a long historical novel considered by some literary critics to be his greatest literary work, which was revolved around the Tuban Kingdom, at the beginning of the Portuguese invasion of the Indonesian archipelago in the 16th century. In 1998, with the toppling of Soeharto's regime and the beginning of the reformation era, the ban for on his books was eventually lifted. Pramoedya remained active as a writer until the last days of his life, when his health deteriorated due to old age and bad smoking his habit of smoking. In 2006 Pramoedya was hospitalized because of complications with diabetes, heart and lung diseases. He died on April 30, 2006 at the age of 81.

2.3 Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Bumi Manusia

Bumi Manusia was first published in 1980, a year after Pramoedya's release from Buru Island. It is the first part of a semi-biographical tetralogy of Minke, the protagonist who is modelled after RM. Tirta Adhi Soerjo, a real historical figure of the anti-colonial movements in Indonesia. The story revolves around the historical emergence of Indonesian nationalism at the turn of the century when the Dutch colonial empire ruled in the East Indies. It explores various themes of universal discourse such as the emergence of nationalism, the corruption of the legal system, gender issues, the contradiction between traditional and modern values, and the importance of language as an instrument for articulating national identity. However, there are two important aspects to be highlighted in the novel: the realistic portrayal of colonial life in Indonesia, which provides the present audiencereaders today with a historical overview of that time and the way the author manages to

convey to the presentmodern readers the complex socio-cultural interactions among various ethnicities in the colonial period and the inherent social attitude underlying these interactions. The story is reconstructed from the historical work which had been carried out before he was imprisoned for years without trial in Buru. In the first six or seven years of imprisonment in Buru, political prisoners were not given access to any writings or articles, let alone allowed to write on a piece of paper, so Pramoedya had to recite the story to his fellow prisoners. The story is what shaped the Buru quartet: *Bumi Manusia*, *Anak Semua Bangsa*, *Jejak Langkah*, and *Rumah Kaca*.

The story is developed through inner conflicts of the main character, which are caused by the contradiction between the modern values he acquired from his western education, the traditional values which came from his Javanese roots, and the harsh social reality of living under the a colonial rule which denies all of the values he was taught to believe. The novel is told in the first-person and tells the life of Minke, a young Javanese aristocrat and the only native who receives a western education in an elite school which only Europeans are allowed to attend. It is set at the end of the 19th century, during the final years of the Dutch colonial rule in Indonesia, and provides detailed illustration on the situationpicture of colonial life in Surabaya at that time.

At the beginning of the novel, the main character is introduced to an exceptional native woman known as Nyai Oentosoroh, the concubine of a Dutch property owner called Herman Mellema, and to her beautiful daughter, Annelies. Over time, Nyai Oentosoroh becomes an important figure in Minke's life, his personal life mentor and spiritual mother. The story of her <https://assignbuster.com/pramoedya-ananta-toer-his-life-and-his-literary-achievements/>

origin, how she was sold into concubinage by her father, her rise in position as the overseer of her master's entire estates and businesses, as well as the fate of her daughter, Annelies, forms major parts of the storyline in *Bumi Manusia*. Minke falls in love with Annelies, whom he eventually marries according to his native customs. However, because of the family dispute over Mellema's inheritance, Annelies had to annul her marriage to Minke by the order of the Dutch colonial court. At the end of the novel, Annelies is forced to leave her mother and her husband Minke, and go to the Netherlands to live with her legal guardian, despite all the efforts made by Nyai Oentosoeroh and Minke to resist the decision of the Dutch courts.

Socio-cultural interaction among different ethnicities (Dutch, Europeans, Indos, Chinese, and natives) in the East Indies plays an important role in the development of the story and is skilfully portrayed by Pramoedya through his inventive use of Indonesian language variations, combination of different registers and the complexity of interplay between Javanese, Old Malay, Dutch, English and Jakartan dialects. One example is given below, where Minke tries to predict tell the identity of a man who follows him covertly, based on a certain ethnic stereotype which is widespread in Indonesia:

Melihat dari pemunculannya, ia bukan orang Tionghoa, juga bukan Peranakan Tionghoa, juga bukan pedagang. Kalau toh Tionghoa Peranakan boleh jadi dari kalangan terpelajar, mungkin pegawai pada kantor Majoor der Chineezen. Atau peranakan Eropa-Tionghoa yang habis berlibur dan kini kembali ke tempat pekerjaan di Surabaya [...] Ia jelas bukan pedagang.

Bukan begitu pakaian pedagang. Atau ia seorang jurubayar pada Borsumrij atau Geowehrij? Atau mungkin sendiri Mayor der Chineezen? Tetapi seorang
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mayor biasanya angkuh dan merasa setara dengan orang Eropa, tak mungkin memperhatikan diriku, bahkan takkan peduli pada Pribumi siapapun. (Bumi Manusia, 1991: 146)

He didn't look Chinese, or like a Mixed-Blood Chinese, nor like a merchant. Anyway, if he was a Mixed-Blood Chinese, he was probably an educated one, perhaps an employee at the office of the *Majoor der Chineezen* - the Dutch-installed leader of the local Chinese community? Or perhaps a Mixed-Blood European-Chinese returning from holidays to his workplace in Surabaya? He was clearly not a merchant. They weren't the clothes of a trader. Or perhaps he was a cashier at one of the 'Big Five' Dutch trading companies - *Borsumij* or *Geowehrij*? Or perhaps he was the *Majoor der Chineezen* himself? But the major were always arrogant, considering themselves equals with Europeans and so wouldn't take any notice of me, or any other Native for that matter. (Bumi Manusia, Lane's translation 1991: 111)

Words containing socio-cultural references abound in the dialogue. However, it is very difficult to render these socio-cultural nuances into English, thus it is understandable if sometimes the English translation cannot convey completely the richness of the dialogue in the novel. One great difficulty in the translation of *Bumi Manusia* is how to convey to the foreign readers the inherent social attitudes embedded in these culture-specific words which operate under different socio-cultural norms and history. One example of a culturally-marked word containing an important socio-cultural reference in *Bumi Manusia* is the word *nyai*. *Nyai* originally refers to a respectful form of address to a Javanese woman. However, the form undergoes a considerable change of meaning when it is adapted used into Indonesian. It becomes a “
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euphemistic, pejorative, and disrespectful term” referring to a historical stereotype of a native concubine or mistress in a colonial Dutch East Indies household and implying the inherent social attitude behind the word nyai (GoGwilt, 2007: 412):

Bukan hanya Mevrouw Télinga atau aku, rasanya siapa pun tahu, begitulah tingkat susila keluarga nyai-nyai: rendah, jorok, tanpa kebudayaan, perhatiannya hanya pada soal-soal berahi semata. Mereka hanya keluarga pelacur, manusia tanpa pribadi, dikodratkan akan tenggelam dalam ketiadaan tanpa bekas [...] Semua lapisan kehidupan menghukum keluarga nyai-nyai; juga semua bangsa: Pribumi, Eropa, Tionghoa, Arab. (Bumi Manusia, 1980: 44)

Not only Mrs. Telinga and I knew, but it felt as if the whole world knew, that such indeed was the moral level of the families of nyais: low, dirty, without culture, moved only by lust. They were the families of prostitutes; they were people without character, destined to sink into nothingness, leaving no trace [...] All social classes had passed judgment on the nyai; also all races: Native, European, Chinese, Arab. (This Earth, 54)

Interactions between Minke, Nyai Oentosoroh and other characters in the book who came from different cultural and language backgrounds are parallel to the diverse culture and language situation in modern Indonesia. The vital role of Nyai Oentosoroh in Minke's life, as the person who is mostly responsible for Minke's growing awareness of the oppression of the Dutch colonial towards rule over him and his fellow countrymen, in some way, represents in some way the indispensable role of language in growing

nationalism in Indonesia. The account of Nyai Oentosoroh's life, her extraordinary characteristics and excellent ability in absorbing the knowledge given by her Dutch master and using it to climb up from the bottom to the top rank of the colonial society, may have an indirect association with the historical development of the Indonesian language and its elevated status as a national language today. In the past, Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian Language), a variant of Bazaar Malay, was a minority language in the East Indies. It was a language of trading and commerce, which is used throughout the Indonesian archipelago. Bazaar Malay was once considered as a language with no aesthetic values and lacking in expressiveness compared to other languages. However, its use as a trading instrument throughout the Indonesian archipelago has enhanced its flexibility in absorbing modern concepts and elaborate cultural elements from other languages and modern concepts brought by western civilisation. This is likely to be one of the reasons why it was selected as the national language of Indonesia.

Bumi Manusia, as the first part of the Buru quartet, provides an important historical account and unique perspective of colonial life at the end of the 19th century, an important period in Indonesian history, which determined the future of the Indonesian people as a free nation. As Razif Bahari argues in his book entitled *Pramoedya Postcolonially*, the tetralogy and its literary and social context may provide valuable insights regarding the force which drives the main character to obtain power and freedom, and could answer some of the questions regarding the construction of history, language, and gender within postcolonial literature literary studies (Bahari, 2007). It is the

significance of cultural, historical, and literary aspects of Bumi Manusia which makes the study of its translation worthwhile. It gives new insights into strategies and methods employed in the translation of cross-cultural texts as well as their cultural implications; and ways to convey effectively the message of the original text to foreign readers without disturbing the story narrative flow and maintaining the target readers' interest and expectations.