

OBITUARY

Pramoedya Ananta Toe, Child of all nations

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Pramoedya Ananta Toer, the great Indonesian writer, leaves a rich legacy that transcends the barriers of language.

PRAMOEDYA ANANTA TOER, widely regarded as the greatest storyteller from South-East Asia, and a contender for the Nobel Prize, died in Jakarta on April 30. He was 81.

In fact, he was much more than a master storyteller. As a writer, he chronicled the great uprising of the Indonesian people against Dutch colonialism, which lasted 300 years. Starting in the middle of the 20th century, as a writer and journalist, he wrote novels, novellas, plays, short stories, literary criticism, polemical writings, historical treatises, and translations of several great Western writers, among them John Steinbeck, Leo Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky. His books have been translated into nearly 30 languages and they find a place in courses on world literature in universities around the world. Ironically, his works are still officially banned in his own country, although it has become increasingly difficult to implement the ban in the face of their popular acceptance.

Much of Pramoedya's monumental work was produced in the face of a brutal dictatorship led by Gen. Suharto in Indonesia, which unleashed the biggest bloodbath of the 20th century after it usurped power in a military coup with the aid of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States in 1965.

Pramoedya spent 14 years (1965-1979) in prison, of which 10 were on Buru Island, a concentration camp about 1,280 kilometres east of Java. Pramoedya was among the 15,000 political prisoners who were transported to Buru Island. In his memoirs (*The Mute's Soliloquy* published to coincide with his 70th birthday), he describes the abominable conditions in the camp which the prisoners themselves had to build without any equipment. They were then forced to clear the land to plant crops to feed themselves. Meanwhile, the starving prisoners ate jungle rodents, snakes and lizards to stay alive.

It was on Buru Island that Pramoedya produced his greatest work, in the most trying of circumstances. The broad structure of the novel was narrated as stories to his fellow prisoners, who passed them around the camp through word of mouth. Later, survivors recalled how Pramoedya's stories lifted their spirits and gave them the courage to cope with the barbaric conditions on the island.

Pramoedya was forced to adopt this technique because the Suharto regime refused to allow political prisoners any reading or writing material. Later, after 1973, when the situation eased somewhat, Pramoedya wrote the novels and smuggled them out of the camp for clandestine publication before the government banned them. Much of the historical material for the Buru Quartet, which he had painstakingly gathered for years before the coup, was destroyed, burnt by armed gangs or ended up as fish wrap on the streets of Jakarta. Later, Pramoedya recounted with gratitude how his fellow prisoners did his share of the physical work at the camp so that he write secretly the Buru stories.

The Buru Quartet, which combined the elements of popular Javanese art of storytelling with Pramoedya's unique understanding of Indonesia's awakening as a modern nation, is a classical contribution to world literature. The Quartet, set in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is not only a moving story of the barbarity of Dutch colonialism but also throws light on the decadent feudalism of Javanese peasant society, ridden by caste and other divisions.

Pramoedya rendered them, in typical Javanese style, as a great epic. He used the full potentialities of the novel as a format to tell an emotional story of a Javanese boy who comes into contact with the modern elements of Dutch colonialism and holds it in awe, but later confronts its oppressive role as a colonial power. Running parallel throughout the Quartet is the story of Javanese feudalism, with its elite collaborating with the Dutch against the peasantry. It is a story that is mostly bleak, but there is also hope. Pramoedya's mastery of Indonesian history, particularly the emerging Indonesian national consciousness, enables him to weave in the potentialities of a popular upsurge. Emotions are brought into full play but Pramoedya never lets it degenerate into meaningless sentimentality or yearning for a bygone era of a supposedly glorious Javanese past.

As the Quartet progresses, Minke, the protagonist, grows up to play the real-life role of Tirta Adhi Soerjo, the Indonesian nationalist journalist who played a pioneering role in the "awakening of the natives" in the early 20th century. (Pramoedya went on to publish a biography of Tirta in 1985, also banned by the Suharto regime.)

Max Lane, a former Australian diplomat who translated into English the Buru Quartet, pointed out that Pramoedya's work differs significantly from work that passes off as "historical" novels. While history in most novels of this genre merely provides the backdrop for the plot, Pramoedya uses history itself as "the primary protagonist". Minke is "history's child at a turning point in his society's history. Pramoedya has shown us how a revolutionary is born."

Max Lane, who was forced to leave Indonesia because of his role as Pramoedya's translator, explained: "To explain the reasons, the dynamics, the causes, the forces at work in pushing history forward without dehumanising or depersonalising it is Pramoedya's great achievement. These are not novels set against the background of historical events, in which the uninformed can become informed about those events while enjoying a good story, as is the case with many historical novels."

After Buru, Pramoedya wrote virtually no fiction for 15 years. He told The New York Times in 1996: "My whole life has been torn apart, I keep thinking of how many of my friends have been murdered." In The Mute's Soliloquy, he diligently compiled a list of his fellow prisoners who died or went missing from Buru. Later, Pramoedya wrote, "At some future time there might be someone capable of writing about them without his hand shaking uncontrollably or his note paper becoming wet with tears. But that person will not be me."

Significantly, Pramoedya never wrote in Javanese, his own language. All his work was in Bahasa Indonesia, a dialect of Malay, which was adopted by the nationalist movement in 1928 as a means of unifying the emerging nation that was Indonesia. The movement for independence recognised the need for a unifying language. It recognised that Javanese could not be a unifying language because it was perceived as an instrument of domination of the archipelago of 13,677 islands that would later become Indonesia. Bahasa Indonesia provided the glue which pioneering nationalist writers used for "nation-building" after independence in 1949.

The Fugitive, one of his earliest works, is regarded as one of the first accomplished works of literature written in Bahasa Indonesia, which was proclaimed the official language of the new nation. A commentator, comparing the work of Pramoedya to Homer, pointed out, "Just as the Homeric dialect helped formalise the concept of Greekness by welding together the various idioms of the

Aegean, Bahasa Indonesia was one of the principal forces that brought about the unity of Indonesia, where more than six hundred languages are still spoken.”

In 1986, the Indonesian government said Pramoedya’s works were being banned because they reflected “socialist realism”, of the “type of literature followed by the Communists”, and that they may “disturb public order”.

Why did the dictatorship feel threatened by Pramoedya? Why, for instance, was the Buru Quartet, which was after all a work of fiction, banned? One explanation is that the Suharto regime felt that Pramoedya’s works, although they referred to a long-gone era, gave hope in a time of misery. A more tangible reason is Pramoedya’s standing as a political being. A fighter for Indonesian independence - he actually participated in the militia fighting for independence against the Dutch - Pramoedya was an ardent supporter of Sukarno, Indonesia’s first President, who was overthrown in the 1965 coup.

After independence, Pramoedya’s writings reflected the pangs of a failed revolution, of corruption and of the power that the Javanese feudal elite wielded in the newly independent nation. In fact, he was imprisoned for a year during the Sukarno presidency for having defied the mass hysteria against the Chinese population in Indonesia. He himself absolved Sukarno of any responsibility in this and blamed the army for his imprisonment.

By the late 1950s he had come to recognise that the revolution was far from over. Instead of staying aloof he joined the People’s Cultural Network (Lekra), which was believed to be close to the PKI, the Communist Party of Indonesia, which was practically wiped out after Suharto took over. Over a million people were killed in the bloodbath; recent archival material shows the complicity of the CIA in this. Pramoedya also wrote for Bintang Timur (Eastern Star), an independent Left newspaper.

In the cultural sphere Pramoedya sifted through Indonesian history and looked for inspiration from literature from around the world; Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* and Gorky’s essay “The People Must Know Their History” inspired him in particular. Unlike Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn he was not just a dissident fighting to save a piece of work. To prove his commitment he joined a small radical group, the People’s Democratic Party (PRD).

Pramoedya believed until the end that although Suharto had been overthrown, the army still held the reins of power. Referring to Megawati Sukarnoputri, Sukarno’s daughter, he pointed out that the Suharto regime gave her a house and a salary as a Member of Parliament but she never took up her father’s cause, let alone of the people. He said: “Megawati came to power on the crest of a youth rebellion. Those kids did not have a figurehead, so they adopted her because she was Sukarno’s daughter. That is all she is.”

In an interview he gave in 1999, he was asked whether he could imagine writing if he was not so intensely focussed on politics. He said: “There are some who say literature should be free of politics. The irony here is that by taking that position, one is, in fact, making a political statement. When we accept, or reject, citizenship in a nation, that is a political act. Paying taxes is a political act, because it is an acknowledgement of political power. It is impossible to separate politics from literature or any other part of human life, because everyone is touched by political power.”

P.S.

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