

Pramoedya Ananta Toer, novelist of the colonial oppressed, dead at 81

Sandy English
5 May 2006

On April 29, the Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer died at his daughter's home in East Jakarta, aged 81, of heart disease and complications from diabetes.

Few writers of the twentieth century produced more potent images of the struggle against imperialism by the oppressed peoples of Asia, both in victory and in defeat, than Pramoedya. His daughter Tatiana Ananta told the Associated Press, "He dedicated his whole life to this country though his work."

But his work is also a contribution to human culture as whole; in his fiction he examined many of the great dilemmas of the last century. In art he recreated oppressed and despised human beings awakening—in contradictory, uneven, and, at times, even atypical ways—to conscious struggle against the social forces that weighed upon them, in particular, imperialism before the Second World War.

His greatest work remains the *Buru Quartet*, so called because it was written under the harshest conditions in the island-prison of Buru where the dictator Suharto put him after the CIA-backed anticommunist coup in 1965—a massacre of hundreds of thousands of socialist-minded workers and peasants.

The four novels, *This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps* and *House of Glass*, begin in Java in 1898 and tell the story of Minke, a native youth who is fortunate enough to get an education in a Dutch school.

As the work progresses, Minke becomes an nationalist intellectual and journalist, exposing the corruption of the Dutch colonialists and discovering discontent throughout Indonesia. He encounters every social layer in the colony; the plantation workers, mixed-race functionaries, Javanese elite, both men and women, and Dutch overlords stand out as individualized yet socially representative characters. One of the most moving episodes in the novel is Minke's understanding of the Chinese nationalist struggle and his love affair with an ethnic Chinese woman.

The author gives a sweeping picture of society in the archipelago at the turn of the last century. The novel began as oral tales Pramoedya told his fellow prisoners on Buru Island in 1973.

To read Pramoedya Ananta Toer is to deepen one's understanding of some of the most oppressed regions on earth and the desire for change among their peoples.

Below we reprint a 2003 review of the English translation of one of his novels that appeared on the WSWS in 2003.

The Girl from the Coast by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, New York, Hyperion, 2002.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer is the chronicler of the experience of the Indonesian people under the rule of imperialism. He was written more than 30 books of fiction, including the acclaimed *Buru Quartet*, and translated the work of such authors as Leo Tolstoy and John Steinbeck into Indonesian. His novels and short stories have treated some of the central concerns of Indonesians in their struggle to free themselves from foreign domination, particularly in the period before the Dutch granted the

nation formal independence in 1949.

Pramoedya was born in 1925 in East Java, the son of a principal at a nationalist school. He attended school in Surabaya and worked for a Japanese news agency during that country's military occupation of Indonesia in 1942-1944. After the war, he participated in a paramilitary resistance organization against the Dutch colonialists, who imprisoned him from 1947 to 1949. From jail, he smuggled out his first novel, *The Fugitive*, about the politics and personal life of a nationalist revolutionary during the final days of the Japanese occupation.

After his release from prison during the bourgeois-nationalist Sukarno regime, Pramoedya wrote several novels set during the 1945 revolution and its aftermath. In the 1950s, he became closely associated with the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), a leading force in Indonesia politics with millions of members and supporters, the largest Stalinist party outside of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China.

Pramoedya appears to have accepted, in some respects, the PKI's cultural line of so-called "socialist realism." In any case, he played a prominent role in the Stalinist-influenced mass People's Cultural Association (Lekra). He edited a journal, taught, and produced influential works of criticism. He was imprisoned briefly in 1960 for defending Indonesia's ethnic Chinese minority.

His life, like the recent history of Indonesia itself, has been dominated by the consequences of the events of October 1, 1965, when a military coup d'état overthrew Sukarno's government. With intelligence provided by the CIA and the assistance of mobs of supporters from right-wing Muslim organizations, the army carried out the systematic arrest, torture and murder of the PKI leadership and large sections of its membership. More than a million PKI members or supporters were killed in every corner of Indonesia.

This disaster had been directly prepared by the leadership of the PKI. The party and its membership were blindsided because they had pursued the Stalinist theory of two-stage revolution for Indonesia. According to this anti-Marxist conception, the task facing the Indonesian population was the completion of the bourgeois-democratic revolution (i.e., the creation of a "healthy," "independent" Indonesian capitalism) led by the "bloc of four classes," in which the working class would be allied with and indeed subordinated to the national bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. The socialist revolution, the second of the "two stages," was placed far into the political future. Such theories have led to nothing but catastrophe for workers and oppressed people in the colonial and semi-colonial countries.

Again and again during the first 15 years of formal independence, the PKI leadership ordered Indonesian workers to curtail their struggles against native (and often foreign-owned) concerns. The PKI helped maintain the Sukarno regime, occupying ministerial posts in the government, even after Sukarno abrogated democratic procedures. The leadership of the PKI kept a tight grip on the working-class on the many occasions when it strove for control of industry and commerce.

The moneyed interests in Indonesian society, however, had no interest in fighting imperialism. These elements—forming one of the classes in the proposed “bloc of four classes”—were more frightened of losing their wealth to the working class and poor farmers. For them the mass support enjoyed by the PKI was the real or potential threat. The PKI and any semblance of an independent movement of workers and peasants had to be eliminated. They found the solution to this problem in the group of right-wing generals led by Suharto and their bloody reign of terror. The leadership not only failed to prepare for the possibility of a military coup, but did not direct its membership to resist. [1]

The Suharto coup d'état resulted in Pramoedy's imprisonment for 14 years. The writer still suffers a loss of hearing from the beating he received when he was arrested “for his own protection” by the military. He was incarcerated on notorious Buru Island where the authorities humiliated and tortured prisoners every day. Eventually, he was allowed to write letters but not to send them. Pramoedy has detailed much of this experience in his book *The Mute's Soliloquy*. He began to narrate his *Buru Quartet* to his fellow prisoners while he was there. He was released in 1979 and lived under restrictions until the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1997.

It is probable that a detailed study of Pramoedy's work would show that his strengths as an artist developed in a complex relationship to the PKI's Stalinist political and cultural policies. Speaking very generally, one could surmise that the existence of a mass movement proclaiming socialism to be its goal and offering a criticism of imperialism provided an impulse and an initial perspective for a sensitive, compassionate artist. On the other hand, the dead hand of Stalinism would inevitably create obstacles at the level of the more complex analysis of socio-historical change and its impact on human relations and the human personality. Pramoedy's writings in English do not reveal a spirit critical of Stalinism, though he expresses contempt for the current political rulers of Indonesia, including Megawati Sukarnoputri, Sukarno's daughter, who, he said, sat in parliament while the Suharto regime murdered its opponents.

The Girl from the Coast (Gadis Pantai) was written in the early 1960s. It was the first part of a trilogy about the rise of the Indonesian nationalist movement at the beginning of the last century. The other two volumes were confiscated by the military in 1965 and eventually destroyed. This work was first translated into English in 1975 and has been retranslated for this edition by Willem Samuels. The novel, according to an epilogue prepared for this translation, is based on the life of Pramoedy's grandmother.

This is the story of a 14-year-old girl (we never know her name) in a poor fishing village on the coast of Java, the most populous island in the Indonesian archipelago. Her good looks attract the notice of the underling of a noble from the local capital of Rembang. The noble, called only the Bendoro (lord) throughout the novel, marries her as a “practice wife,” a mistress with whom he will dispense when he marries a woman of his own class.

The girl travels with her parents and the village headman to Rembang to meet her new husband. Her parents tell her that she will have a better life than she could possibly have imagined. She will sew with silken thread now. She won't have to relieve herself by the seashore. The ones that love her the most help to imprison her.

Pramoedy's girl experiences an especially severe betrayal, but the simplicity of its telling and the way in which the author contrasts its consequences with the more tranquil life in the village further emphasize the catastrophe of her loss. The girl's situation as she is forced into this marriage is extreme, yet simple: it is a life lived not as one wants it, but as necessity imposes.

The situation of Pramoedy's characters presents an even more complex problem in emotional life under class society: the existence of oppression

within the framework of intimacy. The girl meets her husband. He comes to her at night and is gone for most of the day on business with the Dutch. The girl hears the sounds of his slippers on the floor more than she sees his face. His tenderness and patience are unmistakable, but there is hierarchy and status within the pleasure of closeness: the Bendoro has the gentle hands of a scholar and the “complexion of a person who never had to work in the hot day's sun.” This distance between the classes is exacerbated by the subordinate role of women in Java.

It is the servants' job to attempt to bridge the gap. They remind her that she is not longer a fisher-girl, but the wife of a powerful man. She has privileges and should use them. She should imitate the diffidence of the masters. At times, her servants can be confidants, but they always are prepared to keep their own distance from her. Only one maid will tell her the sad story of the life of the poor in Rembang. When the girl asks her if she has ever been beaten, she replies, “Sometimes I think women were put here on this earth for men to beat them.”

The girl takes advantage of her new self-confidence, of the power of a sexual life, but not to imitate the manners of noble lady. Something in her will not let her easily accept everything that is given to her. That is what makes her an interesting and extraordinary person. She becomes less and less settled. Knowledge brings unhappiness.

She discovers that she has enemies. Aristocratic families would like the wealth and power of the Bendoro through legitimate marriage to their daughters. The girl becomes a target of intrigue. A new servant is a spy, rude and snide. And the girl is constantly reminded that she may be tossed aside when she has a child for the Bendoro.

She begs for a visit to her village and the Bendoro agrees, but he insists that her treacherous servant accompany her. She is laden with gifts; this is a most poignant and to some extent mysterious part of the book. She is refreshed by a conversation with the cart driver when he speaks to her in a straightforward and honest way. No one has done this for months. The driver reminds the girl in a matter-of-fact tone of the slave-like status of the native Indonesians. He describes the forced labor in the countryside and cruelty of the Dutch.

The girl now almost comes to open revolt. Full of power now that she is in her village, she can outsmart her servant. At the same time, her own family is obsequious. She is no longer treated as an equal and people must force themselves to speak honestly. It is painful for the girl's father to address her affectionately. She herself becomes the subject of a song by the village minstrel.

The girl returns to the Bendoro. She bears him a child, and, as she has feared, she is sent away from the house. She chooses to be a poor worker. Many years later, she encounters her child, now married to a nationalist. She befriends her with a sprit of strength and independence. There has been a liberation of sorts by the end of the book.

The short-story writer Nell Freudenberger has noted in the *New York Times Book Review* that there are clichés in the translation (for example, the girl is a “wisp of a thing”). This is quite true and does mar the work.

Freudenberger also implies that the novel lacks “the shading and dimension of lived experience.” She means, one supposes, that the book's action is imposed upon characters by the ideas of the writer. Her operative word for many of its situations is *improbable*.

While Freudenberger views the book, on the whole, favorably, she echoes what various critics of Pramoedy, often those hostile to his political views, have said before: politics stifles artistic beauty and insight. The “desire to communicate and the urgency of his message,” Freudenberger says, “have overwhelmed his art.” The girl herself displays the “banner of oppressed Indonesian womanhood.”

Is this girl from the coast of Java at the turn of the 20th century simply a mouthpiece for radical-nationalist ideas? A critical study of Pramoedy must surely wrestle with the relationship of progressive ideas to reality. Is it possible for a writer to create a character who is credible and at the same

time symbolizes something greater than herself, perhaps even “oppressed Indonesian womanhood”?

Those who sympathize with socialist and left-wing ideas have good reason to be instinctively suspicious of literature produced under the influence of Stalinism, even sometimes by quite sincere and honest artists. The bureaucracies in Moscow and Beijing created a “concentration camp” of intellectual life, with disastrous and long-lasting consequences. Many artists in the oppressed countries during the middle and latter parts of the 20th century fell under the influence of Stalinist or nationalist-populist conceptions. These conceptions rejected the objective role of the artist as a cognizer of reality and transformed him or her into the celebrator of various national or bureaucratic programs.

Nevertheless, a reading of Pramoedya’s work suggests that he was a student of reality. What he describes did exist. The conditions of Indonesian women in 1900 were atrocious; they were ground down by their social position in general, by the aristocracy and by Dutch imperialism. The growth in the social consciousness of wide layers of the population is also an historical fact. The girl’s evolution from a naive child-bride to a woman who cannot understand why anyone would want to belong to the aristocracy is both *natural* and *probable*.

What is probable in fictional characters comes, first of all, from the sociologically truthful. It may appear in spite of the writer’s conscious political beliefs, if he or she is an honest artist. In a successful work of art, a character can be both individualized and universal, both a shy teenager exposed to abuse and the “banner of oppressed Indonesian womanhood.” What Freudenberger and many other critics miss is the fact that Pramoedya’s theme is rooted in a century-long social process in Indonesia, the struggle against imperialism and the mass striving, despite betrayals and setbacks, for an alternative to capitalism.

On the whole, the manner in which this novel portrays the emergence of a dissenting consciousness in an oppressed person feels authentic. *The Girl from the Coast* is not as engrossing a tale as *The Buru Quartet*, but it has its place. That place is far above the average product of most American and western European fiction writers and critics.

Notes:

1. Readers interested in the history of the 1965 disaster can find an excellent analysis at <http://www.wsws.org/exhibits/1965coup/coup-1.htm>



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact