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**THE WRITER'S RESPONSIBILITY:
A Preliminary Look at the Depiction and Construction
of Indonesia
in the Works of Pramoedya Ananta Toer**

Patricia B. Henry

The history of Indonesian literature has always been inextricably intertwined with the political realities surrounding it.¹ Since the 1928 Sumpah Pemuda (Oath of Youth), which pledged allegiance to the One Country, One Flag, One Language of Indonesia, and especially through the revolutionary period of 1945-1949, the construction of literature in Indonesian was closely tied to the developing national identity. In large part this was because it was written in a language that, although based on Malay, was not really the "native" language of anyone in Indonesia. It also lacked literary ancestors, inasmuch as it could not truly trace its origins to any one of the regional, "traditional" literatures, and its relationship with the European literary tradition, while real, was poisoned by colonialism.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer, one of Indonesia's most renowned writers and certainly one of its most controversial, has played a seminal role in this history. Born in Blora, Java, in 1925, he has lived in the midst of tremendous chaos—witnessing, suffering, and participating in such events as the Indonesian Nationalist movement, the Japanese occupation during World War II, the struggle for independence and, after independence, the struggle for a workable nation and national identity, including the upheavals of 1965.

¹ A preliminary version of this (still preliminary) paper was presented at the 3rd Annual Conference of the Northwest Regional Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies, The University of Washington, Seattle, October 19-21, 1990; the comments of Dr. Umar Kayam, the panel discussant, are gratefully acknowledged, especially his suggestion to look more closely at *Bukan Pasar Malam*. Thanks also to Laurie Sears, Gai Littler, Mohd. Nor Ismail, and Robert Vore for their comments and discussion.

Pramoedya's writings include stories of revolution and struggle, and his concern with human suffering is evident not only in his literary works but also in his political activities prior to 1965. As a member of Lekra, a communist-front cultural organization, he was actively involved in trying to define a socially relevant role for art and literature, strongly criticizing writers who ascribed to the notion of "art for art's sake" from his position as editor of *Lentera* (a weekly literary supplement of Sukarno's nationalist party paper, *Bintang Timor*). After the abortive coup of 1965, Pramoedya's status as a "fellow traveller" with the Indonesian Communist Party resulted in his arrest and imprisonment for fourteen years on the island of Buru.

Since his release in 1979, he has received much attention and critical praise for four historical novels about the birth of Indonesian nationalism at the beginning of this century. These works, along with all his other writings, are at this point still banned in Indonesia.²

In this paper I would like to consider several themes that come up repeatedly in Pramoedya's work, through which he has, over the years, defined his role as a writer, as a Javanese, and as an Indonesian nationalist. His earlier works of the 1940s and 1950s will be discussed as well, but we will first consider the first two books of the above-mentioned quartet, *Bumi Manusia* (1980) and *Anak Semua Bangsa* (1980), summarized below:

The young protagonist, Minke (modeled, it eventually turns out, on the Javanese journalist and nationalist R. M. Tirta Adhi Soeryo) casts himself in the role of the note-taking Javanese with a Western education; between both cultures, he looks at both as an outsider. He is 18, the year is 1898, and he is one of the very few Javanese being educated at a Dutch secondary school in Surabaya. His world is full of new inventions, such as the locomotive, photography, and printing, as well as new kinds of knowledge, and at the beginning of *Bumi Manusia* (translated by Max Lane as *This Earth*

² A recent article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (August 9, 1990) by Margaret Scott presents an excellent discussion of Pramoedya, past and present, especially with regard to his status as a "non-person" in Indonesia since 1965. Benedict Anderson (1984, 1989), Keith Foulcher (1981), Savitri Scherer (1981), and Anthony Johns (1979), among others, have written extensively on Pramoedya's writings and his role in Indonesian literature. See Anderson 1983 for biographical and bibliographical information on Pramoedya.

of *Mankind*) he is full of enthusiasm for it all. He is by no means the only "outsider" in his world, which is populated with Javanese, Chinese, Madurese, Japanese, Dutch, French, and various combinations of these groups, the most significant for Minke being the family of Nyai Ontosoroh. She is a Javanese who had been sold into concubinage by her father to the Dutch businessman Herman Mellema and has two children, Robert and the beautiful Annelies. Nyai has been running the dairy business of Tuan Mellema for many years; he has become completely degenerate because of a traumatic confrontation with Maurits, the son of his legal, Dutch marriage, and is no longer able to function.

Annelies and Minke fall in love and eventually marry, but when the elder Mellema dies his Dutch son and wife claim the business as well as guardianship of Annelies. In the Dutch courts of the time, Nyai's relationship as mother and Minke's as husband to Annelies are null and void since they are Natives. Despite a noble effort, including eloquent writings by Minke and others in the Dutch press, Annelies is taken off to Holland, leaving Minke in despair at having been betrayed so terribly by his "teacher," Europe.

Anak Semua Bangsa (translated by Lane as *Child of All Nations*) picks up the story at this point and is very much the partner to *Bumi Manusia*. As Foulcher (1981: 10) points out, it "charts [Minke's] slow and often painful progression" towards a more historically true sense of himself and his responsibilities. Annelies dies shortly after having arrived in Holland; Minke and Nyai Ontosoroh continue to struggle to hold on to the business and to come to terms with losing Annelies. Minke, who is now out of school, continues to write for the Dutch language newspaper in Surabaya, but he is constantly being urged by his friends, including Nyai, to learn to write in Malay (the precursor of modern Bahasa Indonesia). At first he resists, seeing this as a step down, and a key series of episodes revolve around his coming to terms with his non-Dutch-speaking identity. He meets a young member of the Chinese Reform Movement who speaks English and has been studying in Japan; he learns of nationalist movements elsewhere in Asia, including the Philippines; and, perhaps most importantly, he undertakes a journey of discovery of Javanese peasant life, a group he had heretofore known far less about than he did about Europe.

Where in *Bumi Manusia*, Minke's choices had been between Europe and the stagnant world of the elite Javanese *priyayi*, by the end of *Anak Semua Bangsa* he has expanded his range consider-

ably, with China, Japan, and the Philippines as models for progressivism and peasant Java as an alternative to the *priyayi* bureaucracy as a model for a Javanese identity (Foulcher 1981: 12). At the end, these new facets of his persona enable Minke to help Nyai fight off the predations of Maurits Mellema, as he tries to take over the business. This also brings the grieving process for the death of Annelies to a kind of conclusion, and the stage is set for Minke to set off, finally, for Batavia, where he will study to be a doctor. The third and fourth books, *Jejak Langkah* and *Rumah Kaca*, continue and conclude the story of Minke's development as a nationalist, but I will not consider them here.

Instead, I would like to look back to a time in Pramoedya's career when he was writing about the tumultuous world around him, as the nation of Indonesia came into being. Such works as *Perburuan* [The Fugitive] (1950), *Bukan Pasar Malam* [Not an All-Night Fair] (1951), and *Tjerita dari Blora* [Stories from Blora] (1952) are among those on which Pramoedya's reputation as a writer was established. The first tells of the twenty-four hours preceding the Japanese surrender (which made possible the Indonesian declaration of independence) of 1945. The Japanese had organized native militia groups, and the hero, Hardo, is on the run after having participated in the rebellion of one such group. The story develops as a series of conversations, first with the corrupt and treacherous father of his fiancée, then with his own father who has, in despair, become a hopeless gambling addict, and finally with his friends, one of whom has joined him in rebellion while the other has betrayed him. At the end, amidst the chaos of Hardo's capture and the Japanese surrender, his fiancée is killed by a stray bullet.

In *Bukan Pasar Malam* and *Tjerita dari Blora*, and elsewhere, many of the same motives come up repeatedly, often in a thinly disguised autobiographical style: The protagonist is often portrayed as an outsider, cut off or alienated from his society. Frequently, there is an irresponsible father figure, who has the right impulses but lacks the inner strength to act on them after constant disappointment; he continues to gamble, despite the anguish this causes his family. Another recurring feature is the depiction of truly awful, ugly, senseless, unremitting craziness and violence, in the context of the revolution; family members kill each other, strangers beat each other to bloody pulps—it is truly a *jaman édan*, a time of madness. There is a vicious circle here—irresponsible

lack of action allows crazy violence to run rampant, and, given enough crazy violence, people soon get to the point where there is nothing for them to do but passively accept whatever happens to them.

As others have noted, Pramoedya can be seen as exemplifying the writer as the eternal outsider (see especially Johns 1979), and the persona of Minke certainly builds on and expands this notion in new and complex ways. At the same time, throughout Pramoedya's writings, there is constant harking to the theme of legitimacy and responsibility; even though the writer and his persona may be functioning outside the structure of "ordinary" society, this does not mean that lawlessness and immorality can be taken lightly. Closely linked to the idea of legitimacy, especially, is the concern with origins evident in many of Pramoedya's writings—"how did we get into this mess?" he seems to ask—and implicit here is the search for the point where the many contradictions inherent in the situations he is depicting can be resolved.³

This concern with origins is especially striking in *Perburuan*, which is set just before the declaration of Indonesian independence after the Japanese surrender. Even in midst of violent descriptions, Pramoedya is concerned with seeking the origins of the violence—see "*Dendam*" ("Revenge," translated and interpreted in Anderson 1989); also with violence as the precursor of the very negative, very Javanese "surrendering" of self portrayed in "*Dia Jang Menjerah*" (also in *Tjerita dari Blora*).

The "*jaman édan*" (time of insanity) described in this and many other stories of the revolution invites comparison to the famous (and much-analysed—see Anderson 1979; Becker 1981; Day 1982; Errington 1989) 19th century "Poem of a time of darkness," the "*Serat Kala Tida*" by Java's last traditional court poet, Ronggawarsita. Given these troubled times, Ronggawarsita

³ The theme of the artist as eternal outsider has much resonance with Euro-Romantic traditions, of course, but there is a Javanese prototype as well. Pramoedya's own description (1983) of the creative process in his early novels draws a rather mysterious picture of a mountain, symbolizing personal experience or "baggage", on which is built a temple (Greek, not Asian) representing rational scientific thought and training, the whole shone upon by the sun which is the "I" of personal consciousness. This image draws on a number of sources, among them, it seems to me, the *gunungan* puppet of the Javanese *wayang* shadow theatre; the meditating *satria* hero of the *wayang* is certainly a clear model of one who is outside the ordinary world yet responsible for it.

acknowledges that "happy are perhaps are those who forget themselves," but "happier still [are] those who are aware and careful (*kang éling lan waspada*)" (Errington 1989: 97). The notion of being aware, of remembering (*éling*), and of being careful and mindful underlies aspects of Pramoedya's work, although not necessarily in any direct way. He does not, for example, tell his readers (as Ronggowarsita tells his readers/hearers) to remember and be mindful, and more often than not, especially in the revolution stories, he tells the stories of those who are *not* at all *éling lan waspada*; what he does do, however, is provide the means for his readers to observe the results, the means for them to be *éling lan waspada* should they choose to do so, by telling them stories of their past and present.

This brings us to his concern with responsibility and legitimacy. The story "*Jang Sudah Hilang*" [That which has disappeared] (in *Tjerita dari Blora*) offers an especially interesting working through of this theme: the child (Pram) experiences various kinds of loss—of dream pennies, the maid who cares for him, his sense of security with his family, especially his father—and in return gains knowledge and words, which are what makes the losses real and falsehood possible. The culmination of his learning is of the concept "legitimacy," *sah*, and of the responsibility he has, to be certain that everything which he has is obtained legitimately. Other stories relate to this concept as well—Pramoedya is especially savage in excoriating people in positions of power who have obtained this power illegitimately and who do not take responsibility for those less powerful who are dependent on them.⁴

Another perspective on loss and the role of language can be found in *Bukan Pasar Malam* (Pramoedya 1964) where, in a virtually autobiographical style, the story is told of the narrator's/Pramoedya's father as he lies dying of tuberculosis. The time is 1949, the period immediately after the revolution; the father's death and dying, and his family's reaction to it, form a backdrop against which scenes from the revolution are superimposed.

As the narrator hastens to his father's bedside, for example, he looks out the train window at the passing scenery and remembers

⁴ Again, in his description of his creative process (1983: 16-48), he refers to "a literature of satria" (which he sarcastically distinguishes from the *wayang satria* literature), and while this has much to do with military values and violence, it seems to overlap significantly with his concern for responsibility and legitimacy as well.

various events that happened to him there when he was a guerilla: a village headman offered his beautiful daughter to the narrator in marriage (to protect her from roving bandits), but the narrator had to move on. Later, he found out she had been carried off by bandits, and he rationalizes his failure to save her with a "fairy tale" he makes up about her being happy and rich, living with the bandits. Various other superimposed stories are related by the father's friends at his funeral: He was a legendary gambler, nationalist, teacher, and revolutionary, according to them. The fact that he died in obscurity, says one, is because he was like Ronggawarsita and did not want to associate with corrupt "clowns" during the current *jaman édan*. But, as one of his Chinese gambling partners points out, life is not an all-night fair, and the stories we tell each other cannot mitigate the fact that we die alone.

The role of language as it develops in the individual and in the society is constantly scrutinized and elaborated on in Pramoedya's works, as many of his commentators have pointed out (Anderson 1984 and 1989; also Foulcher 1981). In this way, either overtly or covertly, Pramoedya fulfills his own responsibility as a writer in legitimizing Bahasa Indonesia.

In *Bumi Manusia* and *Anak Semua Bangsa*, all these aspects play an important part. Language and the role it plays in the life of the young hero Minke becomes preeminent, especially in *Anak Semua Bangsa*: choice of language—Dutch, Malay, Javanese, French, English; choice of style—written vs. spoken; and choice of media—speech, pamphlet, newspaper, are all constantly discussed and argued about.⁵

A theme that comes up in both books, but which is especially fully developed in the second, is the idea of a healthy, cosmopolitan mixing of "bangsa" (ethnic groups) that is subjected to the murderous "tidiness" of the colonial government as it tries to keep racial and imperialistic order (a contrast—and perhaps a foreshadowing—of the unhealthy chaos that Pram describes in his revolution writings as Indonesians resist the reinstatement of the Dutch order).

The final scene in *Anak Semua Bangsa* is a conscious evocation of a *tableaux vivant*, a kind of "play" performance (if only someone

⁵ It is interesting that this concern with language choice goes hand in hand with Minke's and Nyai's discovery of the corruption of capitalism and of the loss of legitimacy that derives from it.

had had a camera!).⁶ It comes complete with two children (Nyai's grandson and Marais' daughter), and a generous sampling of "bangsa"—Madurese, Javanese, various blends of Indo (Java-Dutch, Achenese-French), and French, all confronting the "pure" Dutch son of Nyai's late master Mellema as he comes to claim (illegitimately, since he did not earn it) the business that his father's Nyai built. As thunder rumbles ominously over Surabaya, he emerges from his carriage all dressed in white to face a war of words with Nyai, Minke, the French painter Marais, the Indo writer Kommer, and the Madurese servant Darsam. This is a kind of validation of oral language—Nyai has said they will have to "fight with their mouths" since "these people never read"—but this time, unlike the scene in the Dutch-controlled courtroom where they lost Annelies, their words have power—and Pramoedya makes it clear that Nyai is speaking Malay, not Dutch. Another opposition is the powerless voice that is written about (but not yet published) by Minke in describing Nyai's niece Surati: Forced by her father to become a Nyai, and having no power in her words, she runs away and exposes herself to smallpox so that she can kill her horrible Dutch master by infecting him with her body. (In a similar fashion, a Japanese prostitute in *Bumi Manusia* consciously infects Nyai's son Robert with the syphilis that kills him; Pramoedya seems rather taken with this image of women using their diseased bodies as the ultimate weapon of the weak.) In the final scene of *Anak Semua Bangsa*, the voices that come from the bodies (which are strong, not diseased) have power; interestingly, one of the threats made by the French painter, Marais—in the dawning spirit of political cartoons, perhaps?—is that he will paint a portrait of Maurits Mellema and display it all through Europe, with the title of "The Dutch Vampire"! Thus, the participants in this (melo)drama have pictures to back them up in much the same way that their (oral) voices have writing to legitimize them. Ultimately, however, it is the children—the silent son of Robert Mellema being waved around like a puppet, the weeping

⁶ A striking feature (pointed out to me by Gai Littler and Mohd. Nor Ismail) is the frequency with which references to pictures and paintings come up in both BM and ASB: Like writing, pictures are a way of preserving the past in the present, of inscribing the present, and they can also be part of the print culture, playing a major role in development of the press. Thus, pictures are to real people or scenes, to some extent, as written language is to oral language.

daughter of Marais making an unholy racket of grief as she learns of Annelies' death—who vanquish Maurits, at least temporarily. He scurries away from the people of Buitenzorg as they learn of his evil and gather, muttering threats.

In "*Sembah/Sumpah*," Anderson (1984: 37) remarks on

the odd relationship between Indonesian and Javanese—what one can think of as 'the weight of words,' or the link between language and reality. Both the felt antiquity and the hierarchic rigidities of Javanese make it a language tied tightly to the immediacy of intimate experience and the very nature of the world. Conversely, the modernity of *bahasa Indonesia* and its astonishing absorptive capacities distance it from immediate experience and loosen it from the grip of the world.

This makes it very strange that, in "*Dendam*," the *mantra*—words with active "power" in the world, in this case destroying the haji's invulnerability—is in Bahasa Indonesia. Anderson (1984: 37) feels that

This sense of the 'power' of words seems to be utterly foreign to Indonesian, whose charm for us, and its speakers, is that nothing in it is secret or dangerous, for the language slips lightly along the world. The bite of sacrilege is remote from this language, which has so few sacred cows of its own.

In another article on translating "*Dendam*" Anderson (1989: 52, 58) asks:

Is the madness of *revolusi* imaginable for 'creatures' without "their own language and their own way"? Is nationalism imaginable without *bahasa dan tjaranja sendiri*? Is a nation not an imagined community created out of language? ...In the *revolusi* [Pramoedy] saw the Power of fiction at work, but its Power came from the unmooring of language. The question then became how to trap, or tap, that Power, once the *revolusi* seemed to have run its course....Resurrected in memory and lan-

guage, it cannot be anything but a *dongeng*. The taste of 'Dendam' is not the 'true taste' of blood, but the sweet taste of words: the delicious dizziness of language half-torn from the world, yet still sufficiently attached so that from it 'something live' continues to 'stir.'

In "Second Thoughts," a reconsidering of the same material, Anderson (1989: 71) points out that the violence in "*Dendam*," while triggering (for Javanese) resonance with equally gory scenes from the *Bharatayuddha*, does not have the same relationship to the language that describes it that the latter has, because there is

... a common, connected arbitrariness arising from this inventive fictional and revolutionary liberty. It seems to me that *revolusi* is sensed as something imagined, something that seduces men towards the unknown. There is thus no real basis for creating an epic style a la Bharata-Yuddha....

In the traditional Malay and Javanese world (with traceable links to the worlds of Indic texts), part of what gives words power is knowing who spoke them, and when, and what they *really* mean, who they *really* name. Knowing the origins of things, the correct names for things, is to have the means of controlling them, and gives power. It seems to me that an important part of what Pramoedya is doing in *Bumi Manusia* and *Anak Semua Bangsa* is presenting the origins of Bahasa Indonesia, telling how the words first came into being; in effect he is trying to create some "sacred cows," some deep reference points. Indeed, this language does *not* bear the same kind of relationship to that which it designates as do Pramoedya's revolutionary works. The later novels may not be the *Bharatayuddha* of modern Indonesian literature, but in a way they provide a context (often overtly—"Yet it sounded like a fairy tale: that Japan could force its way onto the soil of the Indies...." (Pramoedya 1984: 352) in which the horrors of the Japanese occupation and the revolution have more depth than was the case before these books existed. The words of Indonesian do not "slip as lightly along the world" in this context; as Foulcher (1981: 1) points out, *Bumi Manusia* "was a novel to explain why other novels had come into being."

The traditional underpinnings of this way of relating language to reality are various. The *Sejarah Melayu* tells of the descent of the first king of Palembang, but he cannot become king until the language of kingship is given to him by a mysterious being named Bat, who tells him what certain things and people should be called. Similarly, in *wayang* and the *Mahabharata*, things do not just happen, the characters are not just themselves, they happen (and are) because of what happened in previous lives, what they said and did that created karma for them, and *who told their stories, to whom* (Suta tells the sages in the Naimisa forest about Vaisampayana telling King Janamejaya about the story of his ancestors as composed by Vyasa and told to the god Ganesha, who wrote it all down; *wayang* came into being as a means of protecting people from the demon Batara Kala who sat, and sits, transfixed, listening to the god Wisnu tell the story of Batara Kala...).

It is certainly possible to take Pramoedya's passion for the past as fitting with the Marxist view of history progressing, of people struggling to overcome their past (McVey 1986: 22), and the way in which Minke goes to study from "the people" clearly, as Foulcher (1981: 14) points out, echoes the "*turun ke bawah*" policy espoused by Lekra. However, the Marxist or class-conflictual content of the works themselves is surely not as much an issue in Indonesia as is the matter of who is telling the stories, that is, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, and what he has done in past lives. In a perhaps excessively convoluted sense, the fact that the Indonesian government is paying attention to the extra-literary context of the telling is not inconsistent with what Pramoedya is doing in providing a literary context for Indonesia that depicts how some of the original users of Indonesian developed their language and nation.

Pramoedya's (and Minke's) dealing with the Javanese/Indonesian identity process is not simply a personal story. It is meant as a model for Javanese and non-Javanese alike, to learn about and construct the Indonesian self that will provide the moral legitimacy for action. Pramoedya's way of doing this is by finding the center/level of abstraction where "*Bhinna ika*" ("that multiplicity," with sandhi becoming "*Bhinneka*") really is "*tunggal ika*" ("that oneness"), while at the same time preserving a glorious and messy profusion of multiplicity as well. This sense of Indonesia's national motto is in some ways closer to the source, the *kakawin* "Sutasoma," than is the modern "Unity in Diversity." The Sutasoma's statement about the illusory quality of the multi-

plicitous phenomenal world is what was once taken to be a truth about the (Hindu-Buddhist) world—true in a different way than a national motto is true—and less easily understood. Pramoedya's model tries to work down toward the deep levels and is dedicated to showing how Javanese (and Madurese, Achenese, Chinese, Indos—even French!) are, or can become, really Indonesian at heart, if they work at it long enough.

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