

PRAMOEDYA ANANTA TOER

Pramoedya Ananta Toer was born on 6 February 1925 on the island of Java, one of the many thousands of Southeast Asian islands comprising the Dutch East Indies—albeit the richest and most populous one. By this time, the Dutch had dominated the area of Pramoedya's birthplace near Java's north coast for more than three hundred years. This was Blora, a small town and district capital located adjacent to Java's famed teak forests and otherwise a place with relatively few resources. A poor place, in other words. Pramoedya's parents, Toer and Saidah, moved there from the nearby town of Rembang two years before he was born. In Blora, Toer became a schoolmaster, beginning as director of an elementary school affiliated with the Javanese nationalist organization Budi Utomo. For her part, Saidah embarked upon a life of work as head of what would become a large, money-strapped household; eventually, she and Toer had nine children. Pramoedya was their first born. The name—as Pramoedya has recorded in his memoirs—reflects “the revolutionary spirit of the time” and “was constructed from the phrase ‘Yang Pertama di Medan,’ or ‘First on the Battlefield.’”

Theirs was an elite family. Both of Pramoedya's parents were literate in Dutch, the result of privileged educations accorded to only a few Natives in the colony. Toer had attended a Dutch-run teacher's college in Yogyakarta and Saidah, after attending a Dutch-medium primary school in Rembang (where Toer was her teacher), was provided private tutors at home. Her father was a prominent Muslim cleric and haji whose large stone home with its spacious grounds faced the town square of Rembang and stood directly across from its Grand Mosque. Pramoedya has written that “she was raised like a feudal princess and was never allowed to sweep the floor or cook.” In Blora, Saidah's high-born status and Toer's position as schoolmaster placed them securely among the local families to be looked up to. Moreover, Toer was a natural leader.

But they were not rich. Indeed, in the years of Pramoedya's youth, as his brothers and sisters were born and as his parents also took in a number of poor relations and wards, the family's economic circumstances steadily declined. This was due in part to the times, especially as the Depression took hold in Java and, later, as the ravages of war reduced nearly everyone to near subsistence. But it was also a consequence of politics. Toer and Saidah were outspoken nationalists. They believed in the cause of “Indonesia,” a free nation to be born from the body of the

Dutch colony. When Sukarno formed the Indonesian Nationalist Party in 1927 to advance this revolutionary cause, Toer became leader of its local branch in Blora, where the Dutch kept an eye on him. Subsequently, he jettisoned the government-approved curriculum at his school in favor of one that privileged Indonesian history and culture and that extolled as heroes those who struggled *against* the Dutch. Because of this, his school—and many others like it across the Indies—lost its license and was later closed. The police seized Toer’s “subversive” textbooks, something the boy Pramoedya witnessed personally. When Toer was subsequently permitted to reopen the school, enrollment dropped dramatically, since graduates of unlicensed schools did not qualify for government jobs. All of this left Toer and the family with very little income and considerable debt. But for his father, writes Pramoedya, “teaching was not just a job, it was a cause.” So even as the family began to sell off its possessions one by one, and as corn replaced rice as the family’s staple food, he says, “neither my mother nor my father was willing to accede to pressure.” Toer kept his head held high and Pramoedya remembers him walking barefoot to work daily, “dressed in a homemade head cloth, a white long-sleeved shirt with a narrow collar, and batik sarong” and carrying himself “with noble bearing, his body erect, his eyes not looking right or left but focused straight ahead.”

At home, it was Pramoedya’s mother Saidah who managed to make ends meet. Raised to look down upon menial labor, she came in her married life to place “great honor on work.” In a household that sometimes provided for as many as twenty people, she did much of the work herself—gardening, cooking, baking, sewing, mending, and weaving. Pramoedya tells us she raised “chickens, goats, pigeons, geese, and ducks” and, to earn extra money, took in sewing and tailoring and made batik cloth, sweet soy sauce, and coconut oil to sell. When she could afford to, she bought extra porcelain tableware and pressure lanterns in town and rented them out to neighbors for parties. All the while, she doted on her growing family and disciplined them, too. Pramoedya still remembers her pinches and spansks.

Pramoedya learned the work ethic from his mother. At one point, she encouraged him to earn some pocket money by raising a goat. When some of his classmates teased him for doing this work of a farm boy and he confessed his shame to his mother, she said, “But what are you ashamed of? Any job that causes no harm to others is honorable work.”

Both of Pramoedya’s parents had a gift for words. His father was a rousing public speaker, a “Lion of the Podium,” Pramoedya says. Toer was steeped in the Javanese literary tradition and he wrote well in Javanese as well as in Indonesian (Malay) and Dutch. He was a poet, too, and also a songwriter who composed patriotic songs for his students as well as popular ditties such as the once well-known song in Dutch about how, in these modern times, the ancient Javanese puppet shadow-play clowns Petruk, Gareng, and Semar “*zitten samen in de kar*” (sit to-

gether in the car). Pramoedya's mother was a storyteller who regaled the children with stories of great Malay heroes and of modern Indonesians (and others like Gandhi) who were advancing the nationalist cause. She also wove stories from Western fairy tales and from items she found in newspapers and magazines, occasionally punctuating her stories by breaking into song.

Pramoedya drew comfort and pleasure from his mother's stories and, he says, became an inveterate daydreamer. This is perhaps why, in his early years, he failed so miserably at school. "Five minutes into a lesson at school," he writes, "and my thoughts would have already wandered to a realm of fantasy that was far more exciting and beautiful than real life." Whatever the reason, Pramoedya had to repeat each of his first three years of formal instruction at his father's institute—so that he had been in school a full six years before entering grade four at the age of ten or eleven. At this point, his father withdrew him from school altogether and tutored him at home for nearly a year. Each evening, father and son took chairs facing each other and the lessons began: "Javanese, Dutch, geography, grammar and other subjects," remembers Pramoedya. "What torture this was for me." He admits these lessons often ended in tears but also that his fear of his father focused his attention and that he did, in fact, begin to learn. Moreover, in occasional after-class strolls around town, Toer spun tales from Java's ancient shadow-puppet theater, the *wayang*, and father and son drew momentarily closer. Not long after he reentered the school, Pramoedya was circumcised. This rite of passage ("for no explicable reason," he says) transformed him. From then on, he succeeded in school and, more importantly, became a prodigious lifelong learner.

His formal education did not go much further, however. After finishing grade seven, Pramoedya longed to study at a private middle school in the town of Madiun. His father squelched this ambition, saying, "Idiot! Maybe if you were smarter, you could." Toer suggested that his son take grade seven over again. Stung by this humiliating rebuke, Pramoedya actually tried to do this but the teacher told him quietly to leave. His mother now came to his rescue. Enlisting Pramoedya's help in a small scheme to profit from fluctuations in the local price of rice, she deftly raised a special fund to support his further education. Canvassing the options, he chose the Radio Vocational School in Surabaya, which offered a diploma after three terms of six months each. Saidah arranged everything and sent him off on the train to Surabaya with a wristwatch and two gold rings and wearing his first pair of shoes.

Writing about this period of his life some forty years later, Pramoedya reflected on the lessons his parents tried to teach him. He recalled, for example, the time during his yearlong ordeal of private lessons, when his father took him aside and said, "Everything is a struggle. Whether you're watching a shadow play, or listening to a story, or reading that

same story yourself, it's all about struggle.... Never be averse to joining the struggle." His mother's most enduring advice was to stand on his own feet and to "be a free person." Pramoedya's later life reveals the extent to which he took both of these lessons to heart.

In Surabaya, Pramoedya lodged with a former student of his father's, in a private room at the back of the family house. He made his way about town on a bicycle provided by his mother and, in his off-school hours, learned to box and saw as many movies as he possibly could—often slipping into the theater when it was already dark and presenting the usher with an expired ticket. Films from the United States, Europe, and elsewhere expanded his sense of the world, as did the books and magazines of all kinds that he now read voraciously. He did reasonably well in radio school but did not find the courses interesting. In the laboratory classes, he was terrified of breaking the expensive equipment and having to pay for it. The final months of his year-and-a-half course in late 1941 transpired amid urgent preparations for war with Japan. Pramoedya himself was called to register for the Surabaya Stadwacht—or local city guard—and his final practicum was interrupted by news of Japan's assault on Pearl Harbor and the nearby Philippines. Great Britain, the United States, and the Dutch East Indies declared war on Japan. (Holland itself was already occupied by Nazi Germany.) "Suddenly," Pramoedya writes, it seemed "the gods of war and upheaval were everywhere: in Europe, Asia, the Pacific, and in my own life." He had completed the radio course. Now, with the Stadwacht breathing down his neck and war looming, he retreated to Blora. "I just ran away," he says.

At home in Blora, Pramoedya and his family watched nervously as Japanese and Allied warplanes dueled in the skies and as the power of local civil authorities evaporated in the face of rumors of impending Japanese victory. On 2 March 1942, the Japanese arrived in Blora. "I remember it so well," writes Pramoedya in "Acceptance" ("Dia yang Menyerah"), his famous short story depicting the times. "They rolled in with two trucks full of soldiers armed to the hilt, and four more trucks piled high with corpses.... Government officials ran about like chickens hopping off the chopping block. Our little town—our poor, ordinary little town with its ordinary assortment of people, good and bad—was shaken to its very roots." In the days and weeks that followed, the Japanese closed Blora's stores, offices, and schools and raped its women and girls. In a panic, the people themselves looted the town's shops and warehouses. Soon, the shelves were bare and people began to go hungry. Toer's school was closed and his family had no income. To provide, Pramoedya and his brother began buying and selling used goods at the town market.

In the midst of this crisis, Pramoedya's mother's always fragile health failed completely. Saidah had tuberculosis and, moreover, had recently given birth to a baby girl. As the Japanese entrenched themselves and the family struggled to survive, Pramoedya was preoccupied with her

alarming decline. He had grown immensely close to her, finally forgiving her strict ways and knowing that, more than anything else, it was her love and high hopes that had made his first steps toward life as a “free person” possible. She and her new baby died in May. Pramoedya was only seventeen years old. Saidah was thirty-four.

During the funeral visitations that followed, Pramoedya discovered that the townswomen who came to cook and pray had emptied his mother’s private armoire of her prized batiks and taken other valuable family possessions. Moreover, none of Saidah’s foster children came to offer condolences. All of this embittered him. Sitting by his mother’s grave about a month later, Pramoedya says, “I promised myself that I would become a better, more useful person than all these people whom I considered to have acted unfairly and unjustly toward my mother.” Silently, he asked his mother’s leave. Before the sun rose the next morning, he and his brother had left for Jakarta.

Pramoedya’s uncle Moedigdo, his father’s brother, lived in the capital city and took the boys in. The house was adjacent to a nationalist-oriented Taman Dewasa middle school and Pramoedya enrolled right away, seizing the opportunity, at last, to extend his formal education. The school possessed an old typewriter and, during the off-hours, he taught himself to type. This new skill was his entrée into a job at the official Japanese news service, Domei, where Moedigdo was already employed. His job interview with Domei’s chief Matano was in English, a language he barely knew. He bluffed his way through by answering “yes” to everything and was soon a full-time typist, reporting to work in a white shirt and white trousers.

At Domei, Pramoedya found himself in the stimulating company of bright young Indonesian journalists (Adam Malik, later to be foreign minister and vice-president, was Matano’s assistant). As a Domei employee, he had access to Dutch-language books forbidden to the public, including dictionaries that he bought with his early wages (and the proceeds from selling one of his mother’s rings) and Dutch encyclopedias from Domei’s own collection. “They became my teachers,” Pramoedya says. Moreover, for a year, the agency permitted him to carry on his studies at Taman Dewasa before the authorities closed the school altogether. This allowed him to finish grade ten of middle school—the highest level of formal education he would ever achieve.

Pramoedya’s confidence grew. He was sending his brother to school and every month he also sent money home to Blora. At the office, he was the speediest typist and won Chief Matano’s favor. In 1944, he was selected as one of two employees to undergo an intensive nine-month course in stenography. Classes were held in the elegant, old Volksraad (People’s Assembly) Building where the Japanese had convened a central advisory board of leading Indonesian nationalists called the Chuo Sangi-in. Sukarno himself chaired the board and, in one session, lectured Pramoedya’s class on politics. Mohammad Hatta came regularly

to teach economics. After seven months, Pramoedyia began apprenticing as stenographer at the formal sessions of the Chuo Sangi-in and found himself transcribing critical deliberations regarding his country's hoped-for independence. In month nine, he was assigned to transcribe for publication a series of lectures by the nationalist poet and orator Muhamad Yamin on Diponegoro (and, subsequently, another on Gajah Mada). These projects gave him a happy sense of accomplishment. He returned to Domei with a diploma and credentials as a second-class stenographer.

When a stenography classmate was promoted to Domei's editorial section and Pramoedyia was reassigned as a typist, he grew angry. She was a middle school graduate and he was not, but in stenography they were equal. "It was discrimination," he says. The agency shifted him to other work—preparing a chronology of the Sino-Japanese War, clipping and filing articles for the archives, and assisting a journalist—but he was now frustrated and restless. He submitted his resignation to both Matano and Adam Malik and, hearing nothing in reply, set out across Java without further ado. Eager to steer clear of the military police, since the Japanese were known to deal harshly with runaways, he stopped only briefly in Blora and then lay low at his aunt's house in a remote village in East Java. When local men who had joined Japanese-sponsored militia units began drifting back to the village without their weapons, Pramoedyia walked to the nearest town for news. There he learned of Japan's defeat in the war and, several days after the fact, of Sukarno and Hatta's declaration of independence for Indonesia on 17 August 1945. Passing through Surabaya on the way home to Blora, he saw the city festooned with red and white flags. Indonesian flags! Soon he was back in Jakarta. "I needed to experience this new state of independence," he says.

Indonesia's independence, he soon learned, was far from secure. The Japanese were still nominally in control, having agreed to maintain order in the islands until the Allies arrived to reclaim them for the Dutch. But Jakarta was now astir with revolutionary fervor and in a precarious state of civil limbo. Back in his old neighborhood, Pramoedyia joined one of the city's hastily improvised revolutionary youth brigades and participated in seizing and occupying the local Japanese naval barracks, sparing the soldiers when an officer brandished a note signed by Sukarno. When Australian soldiers in the vanguard of the Allied arrival overwhelmed the barracks soon thereafter, Pramoedyia was wounded and fled with the other defenders. He now joined a unit of the Indonesian Republic's nascent formal army. As an information officer attached to the Sixth Regiment of the Siliwangi Division, he took part in bloody battles between revolutionary forces and the advancing British troops. He rose to lieutenant and supervised sixty men, mainly collecting intelligence and compiling reports, he says. When, in late 1946, revolutionary commanders moved to rationalize the Republic's still ragtag

forces, Pramoedya chose to be mustered out. After waiting in vain for two months at his final post to collect his promised back pay, penniless Pramoedya hopped on a train and returned to the capital.

In Jakarta, his uncle Moedigdo now held a senior post in the new Republic's Department of Information. Pramoedya joined the staff of the department's Voice of Free Indonesia section and served as a reporter, editor, and sometime production supervisor for the magazine *Sadar*. On 21 July 1947, however, Dutch forces, as part of the so-called First Police Action, seized Republican offices in Jakarta. Pramoedya remembers arriving for work and finding *Sadar's* premises closed and under guard. He managed to slip away and rendezvoused with partisans in his neighborhood who prevailed on him to print and distribute some pro-Republican pamphlets. Instructions to this effect were in his pocket when he was arrested at bayonet point two days later. That same day, Dutch marines raided his uncle's house, where Pramoedya had been lodging, and seized all his papers. Among them were manuscripts of his earliest mature attempts to render the world around him in fiction.

Pramoedya, now twenty-two, had begun writing in elementary school, he says. By this time, he had completed two novels: *Sepuluh Kepala NICA* (The Ten Heads of NICA [Netherlands Indies Civil Administration]), written during his year and a half of soldiering and subsequently lost in the hands of a publisher in 1947; and *Di Tepi Kali Bekasi* (On the Bekasi Riverbank), also about the revolution and lost for the most part in the July raid. Fortunately, Pramoedya had managed to publish a small fragment of this work before his arrest—"Krandji-Bekasi Djatuh" (The Fall of Krandji-Bekasi)—as well as a handful of other short stories in Jakarta magazines. During the same period, he translated two books from Dutch into Indonesian: Lode Zielens's Flemish novel *Moeder Waarom Leven Wij?* (Mother, Why Do We Live?) and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Terre des Hommes*, which in Pramoedya's Indonesian translation became *Bumi Manusia*, a title he would later use for a novel of his own (his famous work, *This Earth of Mankind*). Somehow, amid the turmoil of war and revolution and his own young bitterness at the injustices he saw everywhere, Pramoedya had mustered the will to begin a life of writing.

The Dutch jailed Pramoedya in Bukit Duri Prison in Jakarta and he spent nearly two and a half years there. He was inclined to be uncooperative, thereby courting prison brutalities and, for a time, solitary confinement. (Among other things, he refused to perform forced labor.) In stories written during and after his incarceration, Pramoedya condemned the inhumanities suffered by prisoners like himself whose only crime was to claim their fundamental national rights. But in retrospect, he says, "It was not so harsh." The Dutch fed their prisoners reasonably well and, compared to other jailers later in Pramoedya's life, treated them humanely. Furthermore, Bukit Duri Prison possessed a library with books and current newspapers. Prisoners were permitted

to read and study. Pramoedya studied English and read a history of philosophy and everything he could find on literature and economics. He even studied accounting. He also translated into Indonesian the novel, *Of Mice and Men*, by the American John Steinbeck, one of his favorite writers. Meanwhile, he wrote short stories and completed manuscripts for two novels: *Perburuan* (The Fugitive), recounting the final twenty-four hours of the Japanese Occupation in Blora; and *Keluarga Gerilja* (Guerrilla Family), another novel of revolution. A great boon to Pramoedya during his years in Bukit Duri Prison were visits from Gertrudes Johan Resink, a Dutch Eurasian intellectual and professor of law who openly sided with the Indonesian cause. Resink encouraged Pramoedya in his learning and writing. He walked Pramoedya's prison-written stories past the guards and placed them for publication with *Mimbar Indonesia* (Indonesia's Rostrum) and other magazines. The two men became life-long friends.

Another welcome visitor was Arfah Iljas, a young woman who began visiting Pramoedya regularly after the Dutch allowed female visitors in late 1948. The two had met briefly before, when Pramoedya was a soldier. She now brought him extra food and cigarettes and writing supplies and, on the outside, helped to handle the fees he earned from his stories. Pramoedya proposed to her while he was still a prisoner. And shortly after he was released in December 1949—in the last batch of prisoners to be freed as sovereignty passed finally from the Netherlands to the Republic of Indonesia—he married her.

Pramoedya's new status as a married man and as a citizen of an independent country was accompanied by more happy news. Among the manuscripts the good Professor Resink had smuggled from Bukit Duri Prison was the short novel *Perburuan* (The Fugitive). Resink had entrusted it to H. B. Jassin, a rising literary scholar and an editor at *Mimbar Indonesia*. Without informing Pramoedya, Jassin entered it in a literary competition sponsored by Balai Pustaka, the government publishing house. It won first place for best novel in 1949 and enriched the young writer with a prize of one thousand guilders, "the largest amount of money I had ever received in my life."

Pramoedya moved in with Arfah's welcoming family in a poor Jakarta neighborhood and threw himself into a fierce bout of writing. He now shepherded his prison writing into publication. In addition to *The Fugitive*, two novels and two full collections of short stories appeared in 1950, followed by his reformulated *Di Tepi Kali Bekasi* in 1951. Meanwhile, he was busy with new projects, working at his typewriter until late at night. "I was a madman with my work," he says. The family desperately needed money and soon there would be a child and other family obligations. Under these pressures, Pramoedya and Arfah began to quarrel.

In May 1950, just five months after his release from prison and on his first day of work as an editor at Balai Pustaka, Pramoedya received a telegram saying that his father was gravely ill. Come home quickly, it

said. His friend Resink lent him money for the trip and he and Arfah witnessed the scars of war and their country's poverty as they made their way by train to Blora. There, Pramoedya found the family home in shambles and his lion of a father on his deathbed. Again it was tuberculosis. As he awaited the end with his brothers and sisters, Pramoedya learned of Schoolmaster Toer's desperate final years as the convulsions of revolution swept through Blora—how he was jailed by marauding "Reds" who seized the town briefly in 1948 and how he subsequently served as a government school inspector under the occupying Dutch by day and as a revolutionary partisan by night. Pramoedya's hard feelings for his father now softened and he promised him, as he lay dying, to rebuild the family house. Keeping this costly promise further strained his relationship with Arfah, as did the fact that Pramoedya now brought his three youngest siblings to live with him in Jakarta.

Pramoedya's autobiographical story recounting his father's final days, published in 1951 as *Bukan Pasar Malam* (It's Not an All Night Fair), is one of several from this period that show his growing disillusion with Indonesia's new incarnation. In it, the revolution has laid waste to everything and in its wake there is poverty, corruption, and despair.

After returning to Jakarta, Pramoedya took up his new post as fiction editor with Balai Pustaka. He was given authority to select or reject new fiction to be published by the prestigious house, whose offices served as the capital's meeting place for prominent writers and artists. (Among the novels given the nod by Pramoedya was Mochtar Lubis's *Jalan Tak Ada Ujung* [The Road Has No End]). But Pramoedya was troubled. Balai Pustaka had begun as a colonial institution and continued under Dutch auspices during the revolution, even as Indonesians assumed leadership. It rankled Pramoedya that many of his current colleagues—as long-serving employees of the bureau who had served under the Dutch—were paid more than he was. "All during the revolution," he says, "for years, I worked for the revolution to the point of being a political prisoner. This wasn't acknowledged and I was offended." He became irritable and gained a reputation for being hard to get along with. Finally, he says, "I just left."

Returning to the life of a full-time writer, and working from home, Pramoedya accepted any kind of assignment that would help pay the bills. By this time inflation had badly reduced the value of his writing fees and royalties. So it was something of a godsend in early 1953 that Pramoedya received a fellowship for a year's study in Holland from the Dutch foundation Sticusa (Stichting Culturele Samenwerking). By this time, he and Arfah had two daughters—Pujarosmi (Ros) and Indriati (Ety)—and in June the four of them sailed to the Netherlands aboard the *Johan van Oldenbarneveltdt* and took up residence in Amsterdam.

Pramoedya admits he was intimidated. Although he could read Dutch fluently, he could not really speak or write it well. Other Indonesians he

met in Holland were far better educated than he, and more adept socially. At a formal symposium on modern Indonesian literature in July—the first of its kind—he said nothing at all; he was afraid to speak. In such cosmopolitan company, he felt inferior. Making matters worse, Pramoedya found many of his Dutch hosts patronizing, eager still to impart lessons to their one-time Native subjects. Happily, this was not true for all. At the literature symposium, Pramoedya met Wim F. Wertheim, the left-leaning Dutch sociologist who would become another lifelong champion and friend. And in September, one day in Amsterdam's Vondel Park, Pramoedya met a woman who spoke to him of French literature and became his close friend. This sweet relationship lifted his spirits and restored his confidence.

Although the foundation's stipend was not enough to cover all their expenses, the family was happy in Amsterdam. Pramoedya took odd jobs to make ends meet and the four of them explored "the clean and lovely city." (Next door to the family lived the little girl Annelies, whose name Pramoedya immortalized in his novel, *This Earth of Mankind*, written more than twenty years later.) When Arfah and the girls went home in the autumn, Pramoedya gained weight and strength and found he could work for twenty hours at a stretch. He finished several pieces, including the short stories "Korupsi" (Corruption) and "Midah, Si Manis Bergigi Mas" (Midah, The Girl with Golden Teeth). Thus encouraged, he returned to Indonesia in January 1954, six months before his fellowship expired. In his memoirs, Pramoedya writes, "While on a strictly social level I viewed my stay in the Netherlands as a failure, in psychological terms I felt the trip had done wonders for me."

Back in Indonesia, Pramoedya faced dire economic circumstances. Balai Pustaka, whose royalties had been a major source of his income, was reorganized as a government printing office. Meanwhile, in the country's failing economy, other publishers had reduced their output and their royalties and fees. At the same time, buoyed by his experience in Holland, Pramoedya refused to take on "hack work" and carried on stubbornly as a serious writer. Under the stress, his relationship with Arfah disintegrated altogether. He was humiliated when she insisted that his three siblings live somewhere else. They fought bitterly. As Pramoedya later recorded in a letter to his third daughter, Angrianni (who was born amid this turmoil), on three occasions in fits of rage Arfah ordered him to leave the house. The fourth time she did so, he concluded that their marriage was hopeless. He packed up his "clothes, books, tools, typewriter, and my old Sparta motorcycle" and joined his siblings in the hut they now occupied.

It was about this time, however, while wandering about a Jakarta book fair, that Pramoedya met Maimoenah Thamrin, the niece of Mohammad Hoesni Thamrin, a famous nationalist. She and her sister had a booth at the fair and Pramoedya took to stopping by. "She was the prettiest girl around," he says. The two were soon falling in love. After

he and Arfah were divorced, Pramoedya married Maimoenah. Writing in his memoir, he says, “Maimoenah Thamrin delivered me from a life of uncertainty.” She would indeed be the woman of his life.

Pramoedya and Maimoenah embarked on their married life in a hut with a leaky roof, not far from Pramoedya’s siblings. Although she was from a prominent and relatively well-off family, Maimoenah did all the household work herself. “She gave me complete freedom,” he says. Pramoedya struggled to earn a living in the uncertain economy and was gratified by the offer of three thousand rupiah to translate the Russian Maxim Gorky’s novel, *Mother*, into Indonesian—an offer that came from his friend and frequent visitor, the poet A. S. Dharta. Meanwhile, his stories and articles circulated in Jakarta’s leading literary magazines, including *Mimbar Indonesia*, *Siasat*, and *Kisah*. He began writing regularly for the Indonesian-language *Star Weekly*, whose honorariums were so generous, he says, that one article could support the family modestly for a month. Pramoedya and Maimoenah soon shifted to a better house with a better roof and solid walls and floors and eventually, in 1958, built a comfortable new home of their own in East Jakarta. By this time, they had two daughters, Astuti and Arina.

This happy time in Pramoedya’s private life occurred against the backdrop of an unfolding national crisis. Independence had brought neither prosperity nor stability to Indonesia. Pramoedya’s own fiction from the times records the impact of poverty, corruption, and insecurity on the lives of ordinary people. At the national level, political parties of all stripes vied for influence as prime ministers and their makeshift cabinets changed almost yearly, all under the guiding presence of President Sukarno. Somehow, the new and long-hoped-for nation of Indonesia—the nation of Pramoedya’s own parents’ hopes and dreams—was not cohering. What was wrong? Pramoedya began to ponder this question deeply.

It was evidently his Marxist friend, A. S. Dharta, who first led Pramoedya to think about politics seriously. With Dharta and others, he began to discuss the impact of colonialism in shaping Indonesia’s past and the negative impact of imperialism and foreign capital in shaping its present tortured circumstances. At some point, he came to believe that at least some of the disquieting failures of Indonesia’s independence were the result of an incomplete, or thwarted, revolution. Power had passed from Dutch authorities to Indonesian politicians, it is true, but the people themselves—the great masses of common people—had been bypassed. (This conclusion reflects the fact that Indonesian independence, in the end, had not been won on the battlefield but had been negotiated between the Republic’s leaders and the Dutch.) A trip to the People’s Republic of China in 1956 drove this point home.

Out of the blue, Pramoedya received an invitation from the Chinese embassy to attend the twentieth death anniversary celebration of China’s great revolutionary writer of the early twentieth century, Lu Xun (Lu Hsun). He spent three weeks in China and met several of its

current literary lights, such as Ding Ling and even its prominent foreign minister Zhou Enlai (who had visited Indonesia just a year before to attend President Sukarno's conference of postcolonial Asian and African leaders at Bandung). China impressed Pramoedyas deeply. It had swept past Indonesia and become one of the strongest nations on earth. Moreover, China's strength was based not on "money, profit and loss," he observed, but upon "the capacities of the common people themselves." China's new social system had made this possible. Indonesia's accomplishments were miserable by comparison. And this was because of structural flaws in the country's economy and culture and in its politics—vestigial elements of a feudal and colonial past that were crippling the new nation.

Pramoedyas's enthusiasm for the People's Republic of China was not shared by everyone at home. *Star Weekly* refused to publish his report on the trip and soon dropped him altogether. "When I returned from China," he says, "I was accused of being a communist. No one wanted to publish my books." He found work editing the manuscripts of others and, increasingly, published his own articles in Indonesia's blossoming left-leaning newspapers and journals. One of these, *Bintang Merah* (Red Star), affiliated with Indonesia's large and burgeoning Communist Party—the Partai Komunis Indonesia or, popularly, the PKI—published Pramoedyas's 1957 article in support of Sukarno's proposal to replace Indonesia's messy and apparently ineffectual "liberal democracy" with "guided democracy," Sukarno's term for authoritarian rule. That same year, Pramoedyas led a delegation of artists and writers to meet Sukarno personally and to pledge their support, the first of many such delegations. These acts reflect the degree to which Pramoedyas now believed that Indonesia's dilemma was part of a larger conflict in the world between reactionary and progressive forces, as manifested in the two sides of the Cold War. "I supported Sukarno," he says, "because Sukarno was consistently anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism."

Pramoedyas's identification with the left wing deepened in 1958, when he led Indonesia's delegation to the Asian and African Writers Conference in Tashkent and visited various sites in the Soviet Union and, again, China. More significantly, that same year he joined Lekra, the PKI-affiliated Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (Institute of People's Culture). Among other things, Lekra sought to bring new attention to the arts of Indonesia's common people, such as the folk and working-class theater forms of *lenong* and *ludruk*. "We lifted these people's arts onto the national stage," he says. But Lekra also played an important role in the increasingly vociferous arguments among Indonesia's intellectuals about art and politics. Lekra's links to the PKI made its voice authoritative. And as the Left grew under Sukarno's patronage, so did Lekra's influence. Pramoedyas was never much of a joiner. He says his only activity as a Lekra member was "attending meetings." But, in January 1959, Pramoedyas was invited to speak at the organization's first national congress held in Solo. At the congress, the Marxist theoretician

cian Nyoto propounded the idea that politics must lead in all spheres of life, including culture, a proposition that a great many Indonesian writers and artists rejected. Afterwards, Pramoedya was named an honorary member of Lekra's governing board. This sealed his public identity with the increasingly powerful group and its point of view, which was codified the following year with the slogan, "Politics is the commander."

Pramoedya agreed that "politics should lead," but he did not think that, in Indonesia, politics was the most fundamental problem. He had begun an intensive investigation into the roots of modern Indonesian society and had concluded that culture was a larger problem. Because of centuries of colonial control—some three hundred years in parts of Java—Indonesia's culture had not developed freely, as Europe's had done. It had not grown into a confident modern civilization. Instead, under the colonial yoke, a mentality of subservience took deep roots and, at the same time, oppressive and backward elements of Java's feudal past continued to hold the people in thrall. They remained superstitious, submissive, and easily cowed by the trappings of power and high status—and, thus, easy prey for the world's predatory capitalists and local opportunists alike. Under these circumstances, the stakes were too high to indulge in art "for art's sake." It was the work of a writer to help change the way people saw the world around them, or, as he says, "to inject ideology into the minds of readers. And what I mean by ideology is a principled [view of the] world."

One immediate fruit of Pramoedya's research into Indonesia's past was a series of nine letters addressed to a Chinese friend, which he published in the weekly *Berita Minggu* between November 1959 and February 1960 and, subsequently, as the book *Hoa Kiau di Indonesia* (The Overseas Chinese in Indonesia). An alarming consequence of Indonesia's economic distress in the 1950s was a rising tide of anger and resentment against Chinese citizens and residents who, in many places, wielded considerable economic influence as shopkeepers, merchants, and moneylenders (and, at higher levels, as landlords, factory owners, and financiers). In 1959, President Sukarno issued a decree stating that, as of 1 January 1960, small-business licenses held by "foreigners" outside major urban centers would not be extended. In response, military commanders in some areas began forcing Chinese families to close their stores and to flee into the cities. In the racial hysteria that followed, tens of thousands of Chinese were forced to leave Indonesia and return to China. Aside from human suffering, the incident precipitated a serious diplomatic breach between Indonesia and the People's Republic of China. In his *Hoa Kiau* letters, Pramoedya roundly condemned the behavior of his country.

During his 1956 trip to China, Pramoedya had befriended his young interpreter, Chen Xiaru, and had evidently established a correspondence with her, a conversation by letter that ranged over many topics great and small. In the public *Hoa Kiau* letters, Pramoedya discussed the many contributions of ethnic Chinese people to Indonesian life over

the centuries, in commerce and the arts and in other spheres of life. Indeed, much that was today considered “Indonesian” had begun centuries or decades before as something “Chinese.” Some Chinese Indonesians had a “colonial mentality,” it was true, but during the revolution many Chinese Indonesians had rallied to the cause. By and large, their positive contributions to the country far outweighed the negative. We should embrace them, he said. And all the more so now, when the Chinese and Indonesian people should be standing shoulder to shoulder “to abolish imperialism and colonialism from the face of the earth.”

The book was immediately banned and, a few months later, Pramoedya was interrogated by the military authorities and abruptly escorted to a military jail. “I was kidnapped,” he says. No one informed his family. Maimoenah, who was pregnant with their third child, searched for him frantically without success. Two months passed before a sympathetic member of the prison staff managed to get word to her. When their daughter Tatiana was born, Maimoenah worded the birth announcement to allude to Pramoedya’s captivity. After a second interrogation, Pramoedya was moved to Cipinang Prison. He was accused of being a traitor and held there for the better part of 1961, under conditions of appalling filth and in the company of hardened criminals and the insane. At no time were there any legal proceedings. He was released, at last, on the same day as a group of prisoners who had led the Pemesta Rebellion against the Jakarta government in 1958, thus reinforcing the stigma of treason.

Pramoedya describes this as one of the most bitter experiences of his life. He had been a political prisoner before, but never “in independent Indonesia under an Indonesian government.” Moreover, no one defended him in public. The episode reveals just how sensitive the Chinese issue was in the inflamed political atmosphere of the times. (Sumit Mandal writes that even some artists and intellectuals reacted to Pramoedya’s book “as an offense to the Indonesian nation and the Revolution.”) It also reveals the extraordinary power of Indonesia’s army under martial law, a fact of ever increasing significance in Indonesia’s deepening political crisis.

After his release, Pramoedya rejoined the fray with remarkable vigor. In March 1962, he was named editor of *Lentera* (Lantern), the culture page of the left-wing daily newspaper *Bintang Timur* (Eastern Star), published by Partindo, or Partai Indonesia. Under his editorship, the “page” grew progressively larger and more influential. Pramoedya used it to publish a great deal of his own new work and also as a platform from which to engage in increasingly heated arguments with Indonesia’s intellectuals about the role of literature in the national society.

Because of *Lentera*’s high profile, Pramoedya was now perceived as a public figure. But he seems actually to have devoted most of his time to his own research and to working alone at his typewriter. He was consumed with discovering the true roots of the Indonesian nation and worked tirelessly to unearth them in books, magazines, newspapers,

and other primary documents from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, amassing a huge private research library in the process. From this research, Pramoedya brought out *Panggil Aku Kartini Saja* (Just Call Me Kartini), the 1962 book in which he asserted that the proto-nationalist icon and high-born Kartini had identified herself with the common people, not the noble class into which she was born. He wrote essays on Multatuli (Eduard Douwes Dekker), the Dutch writer and former colonial official who condemned Holland for its predatory colonial practices in the nineteenth century, claiming him as a pioneer of modern Indonesian literature and embarking upon a translation of Dekker's famous novel, *Max Havelaar*. Pramoedya also reconstructed the life and work of Raden Mas Tirto Adhisoerjo, a pioneering Javanese journalist and participant in the early stages of Indonesia's modern awakening. And he collected and read much in the popular literature of Indonesia's late-nineteenth-century cities: dime novels and stories written in island-Southeast Asia's fluid lingua franca, so-called Low Malay, in which Pramoedya identified the true roots of Indonesia's modern literature.

All of this work formed the basis of Pramoedya's revisionist history of Indonesian literature, the subject of frequent *Lentera* essays and of a course at Res Publica University that Pramoedya began teaching in 1962. Among his goals was to free Indonesia's literary history from certain orthodox interpretations established and propagated by the Dutch-founded Balai Pustaka, which ignored the linguistically free-wheeling and culturally heterodox Low Malay tradition and located the roots of modern Indonesian literature in its own officially approved publications—publications in which any hint of true anticolonial feeling was suppressed.

Alongside these projects Pramoedya composed a new novel with a deeply personal source. *Gadis Pantai* (Girl from the Coast) tells the story of his own maternal grandmother. Although his mother Saidah had been brought up in an elite family, her own true mother was not the mother who raised her but a village girl, Satima, who had been provided to her father while he was still a youth as a "trial wife." (She was his second.) After Saidah was born and her father subsequently married someone more appropriate to his social station, Satima was summarily divorced. She lived out the rest of her days on the fringes of Blora and provided for herself by selling used goods. She occasionally came to the house and Pramoedya knew her well as a boy. Only the first few sections of *Gadis Pantai* were serialized in *Bintang Timur*, however, before other events overtook the project and, indeed, overtook Pramoedya's entire life.

By the early 1960s, the political power struggle for control of the Indonesian state and its future had become dangerously polarized. On one side stood the country's huge Communist Party, the PKI, and its legions of affiliated and sympathetic organizations reaching to the grassroots. On the other side stood the country's equally massive Muslim organizations and their equally deep-rooted affiliates, plus other groups and parties that rejected the PKI and its revolutionary message—most significantly, the army. Sukarno had long nurtured constituencies in both camps but increasingly favored the Left. This power struggle

now invaded every aspect of Indonesian life, eventually compelling everyone to choose either one side or the other, or so it felt to a great many people at the time. Writers and artists could not escape. Pramoedya had long since sided with the Left, of course, and as editor of *Lentera* he joined battle with writers and intellectuals of opposing views.

Pramoedya's main complaint about many Indonesian writers and literary figures—including H. B. Jassin, his onetime champion and acknowledged Dean of Indonesian Literature—was that they viewed literature through “Dutch glasses,” that is, from the perspective of certain Western middle-class sensibilities that they learned from the Dutch. In Indonesian literary discussions of the time, these sensibilities were often glossed as “universal humanism,” a concept with which Jassin in particular was identified. Among other things, “universal humanism” seemed to imply that true literature should transcend politics and speak to universal aspects of the human experience. This was naïve, Pramoedya argued. All literature, he said, is political—whether its creators and readers realize it or not—since all literature either reflects or challenges a given status quo, or power structure. And since, in his view, Indonesians badly needed to challenge the power structure they had inherited from the past (and that was being reinforced externally through modern forms of imperialism), so-called humanist literature was part of the problem, not part of the solution.

What he promoted in its place was “socialist realism,” an approach he had studied and admired in the works of Maxim Gorky and that he expounded upon at length during a literature seminar at the University of Indonesia in January 1963. Socialist realism, he explained, focuses on the authentic human experience of common people. Its humanism is not universal but proletarian. In exposing the life of the masses as it truly is, socialist realism poses a challenge to militant capitalism and imperialism and, in doing so, helps combat suffering and injustice. As such, Pramoedya viewed it as a positive and uplifting force. And in his own deft hands, it was.

But socialist realism was also the Lekra party line, which led many people to misunderstand the role Pramoedya now played. He had never read Marx and he never joined the PKI. Moreover, he rarely met with its leaders, and when he did, he was inclined to quarrel with them. He steadfastly claimed his independence. “It’s true,” he says, “I had many acquaintances in the PKI. And sometimes they came by the house. But as for following party orders—for me, that was impossible.” Even so, Pramoedya considered the battle of ideas every bit as important as other elements of his country’s power struggle. In a provocative article in 1962 titled, “That Which Must Be Cleared Away and That Which Must Be Built Up,” he himself laid down the gauntlet.

From the pages of *Bintang Timur*, Pramoedya and like-minded writers repeatedly attacked H. B. Jassin and other “universal humanists”

and nonrevolutionary intellectuals such as Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, Idrus, Sutan Sjahrir, and Mohammad Hatta, as well as certain Dutch scholars of Indonesian literature such as Andreas Teeuw. Also among Lentera's targets was the prominent and widely revered Muslim writer Hamka, whose popular novel, *Tenggelamnya Kapal van der Wijk* (The Sinking of the *van der Wijk*), was attacked as plagiarism. Jassin's defense of Hamka only escalated the angry rhetoric.

By way of defending their position, in September 1963 a group of non-Lekra intellectuals signed a Cultural Manifesto, the famous Manifesto Kebudayaan or, as slyly nicknamed by its opponents, "Manikebu." (Sly because it is a pun for water buffalo sperm.) This document, authored by Wiratmo Soetiko and heavily influenced by H. B. Jassin, defended the independence of art from any *one* ideology or political party. Twenty-one writers and artists signed it and Jassin signed first. The Manifesto was a significant show of strength but it also provided Pramoedya with a consolidated target. The pages of Lentera now heaped scorn upon all the Manikebuists at once. When it was revealed that the Manifesto group was receiving assistance from the army, Pramoedya's worst suspicions were confirmed and the attacks grew harsher.

These bitter debates of the early 1960s were not purely literary. They had consequences. Pramoedya himself had begun the decade in jail. He was released in 1961 but several others soon took his place, among them figures on the other side of the ideological divide such as Mochtar Lubis, Sutan Sjahrir, and Hamka. In May 1964, President Sukarno banned the Cultural Manifesto and withdrew H. B. Jassin's license to publish the magazine *Sastra*, in which the Manifesto had appeared. Jassin and other Manikebuists were forced out of their faculty positions at the national university.

By this time, the Left-Right power struggle had taken on a near hysterical character. The sides were ever more clearly drawn and confrontational, but not so predictably as one might imagine. Even in the armed forces, some chose the Left. In Lentera, Pramoedya declared 1965 "a year of complete clearing away."

On 30 September 1965, an attempted coup d'état launched from within the Indonesian army brought things to a head. Major General Soeharto (Suharto), who controlled the army's Jakarta-based strategic reserve, quickly foiled the clumsy but bloody coup attempt in which six senior generals were murdered. He restored order. Shunting Sukarno aside and seizing upon apparent Communist support for the coup, Soeharto signaled a nationwide cleansing of the PKI and its affiliates. This pogrom stretched for months into the new year, as wave upon wave of violence swept the country. It resulted in the massacre of hundreds of thousands of party members and their families and supporters.

When the coup attempt occurred, Maimoenah had just given birth and was recuperating with her newborn son Yudhistira at her mother's house. The other children now joined her there. Alone at home, Pramoedya carried on with his work, compiling a historical encyclope-

dia and editing some short stories by Sukarno. The authorities had already closed down the *Bintang Timur* offices and Res Publica University, where Pramoedya had been teaching. "I didn't have anywhere to go," he says. An army intelligence officer came by the house and warned him: "Be careful now, Pram. We're going to play with you like a cat plays with a mouse." He waited.

On the Wednesday evening of 13 October, a mob attacked Pramoedya's house. No one intervened to stop them. When Pramoedya stepped outside to face the crowd, an army corporal appeared and said, "Follow me, sir. I'll take you to safety." His hands were tied behind his back with the rope trailed around his neck like a noose. As he was being driven away, a guard in the truck struck him in the face with his gun butt (permanently impairing his hearing) and the mob moved in on his house, looting his precious library and archive and the family's personal possessions—"even the baby's diapers," he says. Behind the house, the looters built a bonfire and burned Pramoedya's books and papers. He was taken to the regional military headquarters and then to prison. He would not be home again for fourteen years.

Pramoedya spent the first four years of his detainment in Jakarta's Salemba Prison. Maimoenah sent food two or three times a week and queued faithfully to see him every visitor's day. From time to time the children came, too. He remembers, once, holding his daughter Astuti on his lap and whispering in her ear. He spent his time studying Old Javanese, German, and French. Then, in July 1969, some five hundred of the prisoners, including Pramoedya, were moved from Salemba Prison to Nusakambangan Island off the south coast of Java, where the barrack floors of his new prison were covered with "a hill of human shit." On 16 August, he and others were loaded aboard the *Adri XV*, a filthy troop ship that carried them eastward for ten days and landed at last on the island of Buru.

Buru Island lies some two thousand miles east of Java. Its only resource of any value is the *kayu putih* (Maleleuca) tree, which produces an aromatic oil. But Dutch attempts to develop commercially viable *kayu putih* plantations in the 1920s and 1930s ended badly and the island remained a backwater. Its four small towns were sparsely populated and poor and, in 1969 when Pramoedya arrived, most of the island was wild and uncultivated. On remote Buru, Indonesia's military dictatorship under Soeharto set up a penal colony for some twelve thousand of its hated political prisoners. Pramoedya's cohort of five hundred was the first to arrive.

As pioneers, Pramoedya and his fellow prisoners were put to work completing their own barracks and, for a time, clearing the adjacent land with their bare hands. When hoes, machetes, and saws arrived, they began to build roads and to open fields to grow cassava, sugarcane, corn, and rice. Even so, food was scarce and the prisoners resorted to eating snakes, worms, mice, and rats, as well as cats and dogs, to muster the energy for the work they were required to do—and simply to

survive. Many men did not survive, however, and by 1972 Pramoedya himself weighed only 117 pounds. The prisoners lived and toiled under the brutal authority of camp guards, who beat them and freely appropriated their food and whatever else they wished. They possessed only tattered articles of clothing and some men worked naked in the fields. Pramoedya was spared this particular humiliation by Maimoenah who, in 1970, managed to send him a parcel of clothing through a German priest on the island. Early in his stay on Buru, someone also gave Pramoedya a fountain pen with ink and a pad of paper. He tried to wrest just fifteen minutes a day to write but found himself stymied. "I couldn't gather my thoughts," he says. And, some time later, he traded his pen for a sun hat.

The Buru prisoners dreamed of freedom, but there was no freedom in sight. And so the small world of Buru began to take on an air of permanence. Some of the food crops eventually prospered and the men learned to augment their diets by fishing and gathering nuts and edible plants from the forest, and by raising animals. By 1973, Pramoedya himself owned eight chickens. He began to exercise regularly. To fend off pain and illness, he and the others shared their knowledge of acupressure, herbal medicines, and homespun remedies such as curing stomach cramps with a vinegar solution, something Pramoedya had discovered years before in Bukit Duri Prison and known on Buru as "Pram's cure." The men entertained themselves with homemade musical instruments and by sharing their rare and precious letters from home. Pramoedya told stories.

For some time now, Pramoedya had been formulating a new work about the period of Indonesia's national awakening in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To this end, he had amassed the library and archive that had been destroyed in October 1965. He now began drawing upon his memory of these materials to create the story of Minke, a brilliant Dutch-educated Javanese youth who comes of age as the twentieth century begins. Pramoedya unfolded the story orally to his friends during idle hours at day's end. And sometime in 1972 or so, he began writing again, working with a ballpoint pen and filling nine tablets before the camp authorities confiscated them.

In October 1973, however, a visit to the Buru camp by General Sumitro, head of Soeharto's security apparatus, resulted in Pramoedya's being officially permitted to write. His fellow prisoners now built for him a tiny office inside their barracks and repaired a cast-off typewriter. They took over his work assignments so that, after rising and exercising and doing a few chores each morning, Pramoedya could spend the rest of his day writing. As he moved into his stride, they also managed to supply him regularly, year after year, with onionskin paper, typewriter ribbons, and "cigarettes, clothing, sugar, and soap." "I survive by the sweat of my friends," he wrote Astuti in 1977. "They love me...and I love them."

Buoyed by the respect and generosity of his fellow prisoners, Pramoedya poured himself into a remarkable body of new work. Minke's

story blossomed into four linked novels, Pramoedya's now famous Buru Quartet: *This Earth of Mankind* (*Bumi Manusia*), *Child of All Nations* (*Anak Semua Bangsa*), *Footsteps* (*Jejak Langkah*), and *House of Glass* (*Rumah Kaca*). In these novels, Pramoedya created from memory a vast historical panorama of the Dutch East Indies at the height of Dutch power and, in Minke, a character who personified the earliest awakening among Holland's native subjects of a new "Indonesian" identity. Aside from Minke's story, Pramoedya completed two new historical novels depicting earlier episodes in Java's history—*Arus Balik* (A Changing Tide) and *Arok dan Dedes* (Arok and Dedes)—and once again embarked on his encyclopedia. Hardened by experience, he enlisted trusted missionaries and visitors (and even a sympathetic navy man) to smuggle copies of his manuscripts out of Buru, a wise precaution since his papers were once again confiscated and destroyed before he was finally released.

Aside from these works, Pramoedya also wrote notes and essays and letters to his children that later formed the basis of his memoir, *The Mute's Soliloquy* (a revised and edited English version of *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu*). In these very personal letters, Pramoedya explains himself to his family and offers fatherly advice on matters such as choosing a spouse, health, exercise, learning, and how to sleep well: "Don't use too high a pillow or a bolster...." He reminds his children of their good fortune, and his, in having Maimoenah who "accompanied me from the incredible poverty that marked the early days of our life together and stood by me through both sorrow and happiness." And he cautions them against weakness. Again to Astuti he wrote, "To bear life's challenges you must be strong."

By the late 1970s, Pramoedya may well have wondered if he would ever see his family again. Some of Buru's surviving prisoners, great numbers of them, had been released. But he had not. Then, in November 1979, Pramoedya and some others were placed aboard a ship and transported to Surabaya, and from there by train to a military base in Central Java, and from there to Semarang where, on 20 December 1979, he was officially "released." Then, still in custody, he was taken to Salemba Prison in Jakarta and soon he was home. In all the years of his captivity, he had never been charged with a crime.

And even now he wasn't free. During his incarceration, Maimoenah had moved the family into a simple but spacious home in East Jakarta. Although reunited with them there, Pramoedya remained under custody of the East Jakarta Military District Command. He was required to report to the local authorities once a week and to seek permission for travel beyond the city. Like other former political prisoners, he was required to carry an ID card identifying him as an ET, or Ex-Tapol (Ex-Political Prisoner), and forbidden to work in government, the mass media, or for any company deemed vital to Indonesia's national interest.

Pramoedya had no plans other than to write, but it would be several years before most of his books could circulate freely in his own country.

Nevertheless, he began to bring them out. Hasta Mitra, a publishing house run by another ET, Joesoef Isak, published the first two Minke books, *Bumi Manusia* and *Anak Semua Bangsa*, in 1981. They sold briskly and were banned in Indonesia the following year. The same fate awaited the other two books from the Buru Quartet, *Jejak Langkah* and *Rumah Kaca*, which were published in 1985 and 1988, respectively, and also subsequently banned. Hasta Mitra published Pramoedya's biography of Tirta Adhisoerjo, the real-life model for Minke, as *Sang Pemula* (The Pioneer) in 1985; it was banned in 1986.

The official explanation for banning Pramoedya's books was that they subversively promoted the now illegal doctrines of Marxism, Leninism, and Communism. But government rules forbidding newspapers and magazines even to mention Pramoedya's name suggest that what Soeharto's New Order regime actually feared was Pramoedya himself and his influence as a prominent intellectual in defiant opposition to the military dictatorship. Pramoedya said, "Every book banned is another star, another badge of honor, on my breast." Meanwhile, his books circulated circumspectly underground in Indonesia and began to be published abroad. His Buru letters and essays, for example, first appeared in Holland in a Dutch translation by Andreas Teeuw, *Lied van een Stomme*, in 1988 and 1989. They were subsequently published in Indonesian/Malay in Malaysia as *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu* and, later still, in English as *The Mute's Soliloquy*. By 1996, all four books of Pramoedya's Buru Quartet had also been published in English. And in 1995 another of his Buru novels, *Arus Balik*, appeared in both Indonesian and Dutch. By this time, international pressure had begun to shame the Indonesian government into allowing Pramoedya's books to circulate locally. Even so, he says, booksellers still received telephone calls from the authorities warning them not to carry them.

As his Buru books gradually made their way to the wider world, Pramoedya kept a low profile under "city arrest" in Jakarta, although in 1992 he began defying orders to report weekly to the local police station. Quietly, at home, he received old friends and scholars from around the world and a new generation of admiring students and young people. He worked again on his often-thwarted encyclopedia project, filling thousands of manuscript pages. He gardened and performed household chores. What he did not do, what he could not do, was write stories. Indeed, after Buru, Pramoedya wrote virtually no new fiction for a decade and a half. "My whole life has been torn apart," he told *New York Times* reporter Seth Mydans in 1996. "I keep thinking of how many of my friends have been murdered." Pramoedya has devoutly compiled and published a detailed list of 315 of his fellow prisoners who died or were lost on Buru. "At some future time," he writes, "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."

Despite the lack of new work, Pramoedya's fiction is now being read widely the world round. Indeed, he has become the most widely read

Indonesian writer in history, an ironic fact considering the stigma attached to his name and his work within Indonesia. Pramoedya remained a defiant critic of the New Order regime until its dramatic collapse, a regime he described as “nothing but militarism.” Echoing his own father’s advice, he told others: “If we don’t struggle, we’re nothing but cattle.”

The role of literature in Indonesia’s struggle, Pramoedya says, is simply “to raise the level of humanity.” But he is no longer interested in applying this standard to the work of others, as he once did. “I don’t want to be a critic anymore,” he says. “I only write.” And Pramoedya writes, he says, not to entertain but “to make people aware of the world as it exists.” Aside from this, he has little to say about his own short stories and novels. Interpreting them, criticizing them, finding meaning in them, “I leave all that to readers.”

“My books have a life of their own.”

James R. Rush

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