

## READING PRAMOEDYA

### An Australian academic ponders the personal impact of Pramoedya's writing

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My memories of being a beginning student in *Bahasa Indonesia* are somehow inextricably bound up with poring over some of the stories from Pramoedya's early collection, *Cerita dari Blora* (Stories from Blora). Of course I wasn't actually a complete beginner when I first met Pramoedya – the heading on the yellowing, roneoed, old-spelling copies of those stories that I still hold dear reminds me that it was in third year BIM (Bahasa Indonesia & Malay) at the Australian National University that we began to explore those marvellous stories, so many of them based on Pramoedya's life.

If asked to nominate my favourite Pramoedya stories I would have to include some of those I first read at that time, stories written with such poignancy yet never drifting into sentimentality. Their characters have stayed with me now for more than thirty years. I still feel the anguish of eight-year Inem as she prepares to be married off, and the steely resolve of Gus Muk's mother not to take her back into the household when the marriage fails, because she is a nine-year old divorcee and this makes her a potential corrupting influence on the morals of the boys in the household. I can still remember the sense of betrayal of the narrator of *Sunat* (Circumcision) when he realises that circumcision is not going to make him a true Muslim because his family is too poor to ever be able to afford to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. And from one of my other favourites, *Bukan Pasar Malam* (It's not an All Night Market), I still feel the palpable despondency of the narrator (Pramoedya) as he learns that his father has died of a broken heart, a sense of despair brought on by the failure of the Indonesian revolution to bring about social reform.

And now, after all these years, I have the courage to openly disagree with the assessment of Pramoedya's characters that my professor, Anthony Johns, published back in 1963. Professor Johns was highly esteemed, and we all held him in great awe, but he was not a fan of Pramoedya's early writing. In the journal *Meanjin*, he wrote that Pramoedya's characters 'are little more than personifications of attitudes; nowhere does anyone make a significant choice; nowhere are we introduced to the complexities of self-doubt, inner struggle and development'. To me, Pramoedya's characters are living, breathing people, bringing to the pages of his stories the whole gamut of human experience and emotions.

Of course Professor Johns wrote those words many years before Pramoedya published what most term his 'masterpiece' the four historical novels widely-known in English as the *Buru Quartet*. Far from lacking in development, the pages of these novels are populated with characters many would argue are consumed by their inner struggle and self-doubt. Reading those novels, as well as being drawn into the complex and heady world of the early Indonesian nationalist movement, one follows Minke's progress as one would a close friend, in turn exhilarated by his insights, exasperated by his pomposity, saddened by his failures.

In 1995 when I picked up a poorly-bound copy of Pramoedya's prison memoirs, *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu* (it fell apart within a few hours), I expected a standard

prison-diary account of the trials of life on Buru Island that I would dip into whenever I had a moment to spare. In fact I found couldn't put it down. Right from the opening sentence, where Pramoedya indicates that what he is writing is intended to be a wedding present for his daughter, I was drawn in by his inimitable writing style and powers of observation. As Willem Samuels tells us in his English translation of the memoirs (*The Mute's Soliloquy*, 1999), this work is 'a celebration of the human spirit'. I still find it compelling reading.

Anyone attempting to evaluate the contribution made by Pramoedya to literature, history and political debate in Indonesia will find that there is a wealth of material to draw on. His unswerving commitment to justice in everything he did, in the face of unimaginable obstacles, has served as an inspiration to many. But for someone like me, who passionately believes that literature can illuminate human experience in ways that nothing else can, the key to Pramoedya's achievement comes in a line from his novel *Bumi Manusia* (This Earth of Mankind): "Without a love of literature you are nothing but intelligent animals." Pramoedya evokes that love within us, and in doing so, he raises our sense of what it is to be human.