



Pramoedya Ananta Toer

Photo Credit: Mary Fennessy

The Mute Soliloquy and The Buru Quartet

reviewed by
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In her acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 1996, Nobel laureate Toni Morrison discussed two forms of censorship which prevent people from “the dance of the open mind when it engages another equally open one.” The first occurs in “free” and affluent countries such as the U.S., where the pressure to perform and succeed prevent this dance. Who can afford the time to read a book? The second occurs in politically repressive countries such as Indonesia where writers such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer join this dance at the risk of their own lives.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Pram to his friends, was born on the island of Java in 1925. He was imprisoned first by the Dutch from 1947 to 1949 for his role in the Indonesian revolution, then arrested in 1965 by the military when he was at home editing a collection of short stories by then President Soekarno. His library and materials were destroyed.

Pramoedya was one of an estimated one and a half million people arrested and then imprisoned or killed by the New Order regime. As he explained in a letter to his daughter, “I lost everything or, to be more accu-

rate, all the illusions I had ever owned... What would happen to me if my voice, my sole means of communication, were to be taken from me? Is it possible to take from a man his right to speak to himself?”

The answer was found on Buru Island Penal Colony, where Pramoedya and 12,000 other “B class” prisoners were taken in 1969. There they were forced to develop the island by hand, building roads and cultivating the food needed for survival. Even if Pramoedya had dared to risk writing: at that time, he was often too weak from malnourishment to gather his thoughts. He found that remembering one of his children’s names might take a week. Writing materials were often too precious to obtain or keep. Despite the dangers and restrictions to writing, Pramoedya told stories to his fellow prisoners, later produced into four novels called the Buru Quartet. That he was able to eventually think creatively and find the means to write at all is amazing, and that he produced work considered for a Nobel Prize is testimony to his talent.

The struggle to be a writer under such adversity is chronicled in the first English translation of his memoirs, *The Mute’s Soliloquy*. (Hyperion). Although many of the chapters are based on letters to his children, Pramoedya wrote these letters knowing that his wife and children would probably never be allowed to read them. The result is a father’s attempt to “provide stories, interpretations, and assessments (so) that a picture of their father will emerge, however blurred” even while lamenting that, “still more blurred” will be the link between (my children) and my parents, the generation above me.”

In his letters, Pramoedya describes the difficult relationship he had with his father as well as the love and gratitude he feels for his mother—the woman against whom all others are compared. He also writes candidly to a daughter from his first marriage about the financial and interpersonal problems that ended that relationship, as well as how he met and married his second wife who has been a devoted partner for over twenty years. He comments humbly on his status as a famous writer in the penal colony and shares a continual inner struggle to write in the face of self-doubt—a struggle that ironically seems to define so many creative minds.

Interspersed with very personal notes to his children, asking about their health and happiness, lamenting his absence as they grow, is the chronicle of Pramoedya’s own life from childhood through his development as a writer and survival as a political prisoner. The environment in which he worked, made career choices, married, and raised a family is almost impossible to comprehend—from Dutch colonization, to the Japanese occupation, to the Indonesian revolution and the rise of the New Order regime that sent him to Buru.

Throughout his narrative, Pramoedya finds compassion for all people affected by the changing political power struggles, and describes images of their suffering. One example is a Dutch family following the takeover by the Japanese; they are barefoot and simply dressed in traditional Javanese clothing. Their sun burnt faces are marked by desperation and fear, and yet no one dares to help them hide.

Pramoedya was one of the first political prisoners sent to Buru in 1969, and one of the last to leave in 1979. For years afterward, he lived under city arrest in Jakarta, and today must be wary of police and government spies when leaving his home. Selected publications by Pramoedya are now available in more than three dozen languages but possession and distribution of Pramoedya’s books in Indonesia is still a punishable crime.

Despite the danger and difficulty of writing, Pramoedya has defied censorship from the state to the personal level. In recognition of his achievements, he will be awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Michigan on May 1st. In addition to talks given on campus preceding graduation, he will visit Shaman Drum Bookshop on May 3rd from 8 to 10 pm. In addition to showing a video documentary, “The Mute’s Song,” Pramoedya will answer questions about his life and work. ☑

**Check our
calendar for
Shaman Drum
Bookshop
events in May
and June.**

