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Postcolonial Transition

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On a Roll: Pramoedya and the Postcolonial Transition

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It has become almost an orthodoxy in writing on the life and work of Pramoedya Ananta Toer to refer to a period of change, if not reversal, that takes place in Pramoedya's ideological outlooks in the second half of the 1950s. Prior to this time, Pramoedya is generally seen as an exponent of 'universal humanism', the liberal and individualistic cultural ideology of the loose association of writers, artists and intellectuals often referred to as the 'Gelanggang group' or the 'Angkatan 45', the generation of the revolution in Indonesian literature. Following his visit to China in late 1956, a shift in Pramoedya's allegiances is seen to take place. From this time, he forswears his earlier role as an 'unattached intellectual' (Farid n.d: 5) and pursues a commitment to a party-political definition of the role of art and literature in the life of the nation. This changed outlook ultimately leads to Pramoedya's key role as a spokesman for the left in the bitterly-fought cultural polemics of the early 1960s.

The signal for the turning point is usually found in the autobiographical short story, *Sunyisenyap di Siang Hidup* of June 1956. Here Pramoedya gives full rein to a sense of disillusionment and futility, as he details the failure of the story's protagonist to find a decent standard of living for himself and his family and a meaningful role for his writing in the life of the community and the nation. Visiting China as a guest of the Chinese Writers' Federation only four months after the publication of this story, Pramoedya is usually presented as finding an antidote to his disillusionment in the purposeful existence and the material sufficiency of the writer in Mao's China. He returns home committed to replicating the Chinese model, through cultural and political engagement in Indonesia.

The main outlines of this view of Pramoedya's literary biography were laid down initially in the writing of the Dutch historian and critic of Indonesian literature, A. Teeuw. In his influential *Modern Indonesian Literature* of 1967, the first book-length survey of Indonesian literature to be published in English, Teeuw wrote: 'In this story [*Sunyisenyap di Siang Hidup*] the writer seems to have reached a stage where he is ready to replace his dreams with action – he has reached this stage because of his embitterment with the world around him, and also because of this disappointment at the futility of his own life, at the failure of his writing and the insufficiency of his humanity' (Teeuw 1967: 178). Later, in 1975, these words are quoted in part as background to the story in the introduction to Harry Aveling's translation of examples of Pramoedya's early writing, *A Heap of Ashes* (Toer 1975). Here again, 1957 is seen as the year Pramoedya switches his ideological allegiances. Closer to the present, the most detailed and carefully-researched study of Pramoedya's career in this period yet to appear, Martina Heinschke's 1996 article, 'Between Gelanggang and Lekra: Pramoedya's Developing Literary Concepts', comes to a much more nuanced, but essentially similar conclusion: 'Thus, prompted primarily by his own experiences of the marginal role of literature in society and of economic exigencies, Pramoedya resolved the disparity inherent in his earlier concept

of literature between social commitment and the autonomy of art in favor of commitment' (Heinschke 1996: 169).¹

In Indonesia itself, the collective trauma of 1965 and Pramoedya's perceived 'terrorising' of those writers and intellectuals who rejected the programmatic expression of social commitment in the years before 1965, meant that the literary climate during the New Order years remained steadfastly uncondusive to any considered assessment of Pramoedya's prolific outpouring of writing from the period. The dominance throughout the New Order period of the H B Jassin 'school' of literary criticism meant that Pramoedya's perceived 'betrayal' of the ideal of literature and art untainted by politics remained firmly entrenched as critical orthodoxy. As Stephen Miller and Dorothy Meyer have noted, even the sympathetic obituaries, both by Indonesians and outsiders, that followed Pramoedya's death in April 2006, found difficulty in talking about this aspect of Pramoedya's career in any other terms (Miller and Meyer 2006).

It is likely that any major reconsideration and redrawing of the lines of Pramoedya's early career will need to await the completion of the large scale literary biography of Pramoedya that is currently being undertaken by Hilmar Farid in Jakarta. Indications are that Farid's planned work will be the first comprehensive literary biography of any Indonesian writer to date, telling the full story of Pramoedya's life and career through the kind of detailed research of oral and written sources that has never before been attempted in the field of Indonesian literary history and criticism.² Meanwhile, however, the publication in 2004 of *Menggelinding I*, a collection of 58 literary works and essays by Pramoedya in the period between 1947 and 1956, makes an important contribution to the field of Pramoedya studies. It offers readers and observers of modern Indonesian literature an easily-accessible and fascinating window on the young Pramoedya, and a useful corrective, in some ways, to the force of received opinion about his intellectual and creative development.³ It reminds us that we are dealing here with the thinking of a young man who, like the rest of his generation, has already lived through periods of great historical upheaval and change. (Pramoedya was born in 1925, so in the period covered by the collection, he was aged between 22 and 31.) We see him dealing with a wide range of foreign influences, especially from the West, and writing prolifically as he works through a kaleidoscope of ideas and approaches to the realities of life as a creative writer in a postcolonial nation. By focussing on particular aspects of his writing, it is possible to emphasise different aspects of the range of ideas and positions he is exploring, even, perhaps, to point out possible anomalies in his thinking. Undeniably, however, there are the lines of a consistently evolving understanding of the nation and its literary life, and of the hugely significant place of the one in the nature and existence of the other.

¹ Even more direct was the statement by Hong Liu, in his important article published along with that of Martina Heinschke in *Indonesia*: 'After the end of 1956, Pramoedya changed from a detached writer to an active fighter; his universal humanism was replaced by devout socialist realism' (Liu 1996: 135). An earlier indication of the same sense of 'change' is signalled in the title of the PhD thesis by Savitri Scherer, *From Culture to Politics: The Writings of Pramoedya Ananta Toer* (Scherer 1981).

² An indication of the range and style of Farid's work may be gleaned from his unpublished paper, 'Pramoedya dan Historiografi Indonesia' (Farid n.d.).

³ Although the collection includes some previously unpublished literary works and essays, the bulk of its contents have already been studied by researchers like Heinschke and Scherer. Bringing together such a large collection in a single volume, however, *Menggelinding I* offers a wider range of readers the opportunity to form their own views of Pramoedya's development during this period.

To see these lines of consistency, it is sometimes necessary to lay aside the centrality of some of the works that dominate the received understanding of Pramoedya the writer during this period. For example, the stories collected in the canonical *Cerita dari Blora* of 1952 are indeed great and lasting works, now firmly entrenched as milestones in Indonesian literary history. However they do not represent the full range of the positions and outlooks emerging out of Pramoedya's experience of the Indonesian revolution. Similarly, while *Sunyisenyap di Siang Hidup* may be the fullest and most striking single work dealing with Pramoedya's sense of alienation from the condition of postcoloniality in 1950s Indonesia, it does not stand alone, and it does not mark a radical shift from a range of positions already articulated in his thinking from the early 1950s. The period after Pramoedya's China visit in 1956 does indeed mark a distinct new chapter in his literary biography; but just like a chapter in a novel, or even a good academic thesis, its bases are already being laid in the chapters that precede it.

It is some inkling of how these chapters need to be written that *Menggelinding I* provides. It suggests that maybe it is time to revise the standard picture of the development of Pramoedya's writing that begins with novels like *Perburuan* and *Keluarga Gerilya* and the stories of *Cerita dari Blora* and progresses through the post-independence disillusionment of *Bukan Pasar Malam* and the despair of *Sunyisenyap di Siang Hidup* to the 1957 resolution of a personal and artistic crisis, or, as some sources would have it, a betrayal of his earlier ideals. It adds weight to the 'alternative', but perhaps more essential Pramoedya, that would begin with *Di Tepi Kali Bekasi*, progress through the non-anthologised short stories and essays such as those included in this collection, before moving on to the novel *Korupsi* and the stories of *Cerita dari Jakarta* and the post-1957 'shift'.⁴ This would highlight a more consistent pattern of development, one that does not dismiss the significance of Pramoedya's 1956 visit to China, but one that places the visit in proper perspective, avoiding the need for the sense of a 'betrayal of ideals' that is implicit in much of the existing writing on Pramoedya's early development. In what follows here, I aim to sketch out the contribution that the *Menggelinding I* collection makes to this 'alternative' reading.

The period covered by the essays and short stories under discussion here is backgrounded by some important developments in Indonesian literary history: the declaration of the *Surat Kepercayaan Gelanggang* in 1949 and the formation of LEKRA in 1950, the debates on a 'crisis' in literature that began to surface as early as 1951 (Teeuw 1967: 140) and, in the full glare of these debates, the Amsterdam symposium on modern Indonesian literature in June 1953.⁵ In Pramoedya's personal biography it includes his visit to the Netherlands in the second half of 1953, an experience which is known to have left a largely negative impression on him personally, but which his essays of the time suggest was also the source of some intellectual ambiguity, an ambiguity that fed into the mix of ideas working themselves out in Pramoedya's mind at this time. The legacy of the West figures constantly in

⁴ In a 1993 essay, I suggested that Pramoedya's early fiction did indicate somewhat contradictory bases for the development of his novelistic oeuvre, most notably apparent in the contrast between his first novel, *Di Tepi Kali Bekasi*, and the much better-known *Keluarga Gerilya* that soon followed it (see Foulcher 1993).

⁵ This symposium, to be discussed below, was organised by the Sticusa (Stichting voor Culturele Samenwerking) the Dutch Foundation for Cultural Cooperation, which later figured in Pramoedya's contribution to the cultural polemics of the 1960s. It was most likely the first international seminar to be held on the topic of modern Indonesian literature.

Menggelinding I, both as an irritant and an inspiration, and if we are to understand the development of Pramoedya's thinking, it is important to give due consideration to both.

Pramoedya's 'stories from Jakarta'

In writing on modern Indonesian literature, it has only been in fairly recent times that Pramoedya's 1957 collection, *Cerita dari Jakarta*, has begun to draw critical attention and acclaim. Prior to Benedict Anderson's highlighting of the qualities of two of these stories in an essay of 1984 (Anderson 1990: 219-223), the subsequent attention given to extracts from the collection in a special Pramoedya edition of *Indonesia* in April 1996 and the eventual translation of the whole collection into English in 1999 (Toer 1999), these stories tended to remain the shadow of the *Cerita dari Blora* collection.⁶ Yet with a few exceptions, both collections are contemporary with the earliest period covered by the contents of *Menggelinding I*, the beginning of Pramoedya's creative writing in the early years of the national revolution. This contemporaneity of the two short story collections is important, because if Pramoedya's literary biography is reckoned solely in terms of their publication dates, his writing would be seen to move from the 'universal humanist' themes of *Cerita dari Blora* in 1952 (such as the evocative recollections of childhood and the denunciation of war and the human suffering it brings) to the much more bitter and satirical social themes of *Cerita dari Jakarta* in 1957 (the ironic parody of the 'Indo mentality' and the cruel self-centredness of the 'new priyayi', for example). In fact, *Menggelinding I* would tend to confirm that it is the biting irony of the *Cerita dari Jakarta* that is the better guide to the way Pramoedya saw the relationship between social commitment and literature at the very beginning of his career as a creative writer. In the additional 'stories from Jakarta' included in *Menggelinding I*, some of them written when he was a 22-year old ex-guerrilla fighter working on behalf of the Republic in Dutch-occupied Jakarta, Pramoedya begins his denunciation of the Indonesian nation for its failure to channel the revolutionary aspirations of its youth. As a citizen of independent Indonesia four or five years later, he looks around him and sees only squalor, and a betrayal of the Indonesian people by their leaders. Implicit in the irony is the need for an alternative path to nationhood, maybe even the 'completion' of a failed revolution for national independence.

These themes start to find expression in some of Pramoedya's very first writing. The short story *Si Pandir* is dated January 1947. Its context is the *pemuda* resentment at the Army's 'regularisation' of the guerrilla units (*lasykar*) that comprised the Badan Keamanan Rakyat in the early months of the Indonesian revolution,⁷ and it indicates that Pramoedya's sympathies at this time lie unambiguously with the experience of betrayed revolutionary youth. It tells the story of Eduard ('Edu'), a 17-year old Menadonese youth, fighting with guerrilla forces

⁶ In his 1967 comments, Teeuw had been quite dismissive of the *Cerita dari Jakarta* stories, describing them as 'nearly all stories about people and things in Djakarta, mostly gloomy things and tragic people which in themselves are indeed good enough to affect us emotionally, but in Pramoedya's hands do not have the extra emotional force which would stamp them as genuine works of art' (1967: 175). Referencing Anderson in his 1993 book on Pramoedya's writing, however, he described the now most famous story in the collection, *Jongos + Babu* as a '*prachtige verhaal*' ('magnificent story') (Teeuw 1993: 169).

⁷ This detail apparently refers to the reduction in *lasykar* numbers that began in late 1946, following an ordinance by the State Defence Council (Dewan Pertahanan Negara) designed to formalise the defence of the new republic (see Cribb 1991: 121-2).

outside Jakarta, who, in the story's opening paragraph, receives a letter from his sister urging him to return home to Jakarta to visit his sick brother.

On his receipt of the letter, Edu's comrades remind him of his duty to the cause, and in the face of this peer pressure, he tears up the letter in front of them. But he is tormented by thoughts of his mother struggling to care for her two younger children in Jakarta (his father was killed fighting the Japanese in Kalimantan), and without telling his comrades, he asks for leave and sets out for home. Reunited with his family, he is now under pressure to stay. His mother begs him not to return to the fighting – after all, he has only just begun SMP, and must think of his future. But Edu says he must be prepared to give his life to the cause, and he shares this idealism with his little brother, Hans, who pleads from his hospital bed to be taken to the front when he is older. Edu returns to his unit, and lives the life of a brave freedom fighter. Come the 'army reorganisation', however, he is demobbed, and sent home in sorrow.⁸ His mother now urges him to take up the cause of serving Indonesia in a different way, by completing his education. 'Be like your sister,' she says, 'don't add to the ranks of your country's uneducated.'

Edu returns to school, but he has no aptitude for formal education, and he is quickly dubbed 'Si Pandir' ('The Duncie') by his teachers. He himself comes to believe he is stupid, dim-witted and unable to turn his brain to anything but carrying out orders. But his spirit keeps flying free, returning to the scenes of battle. He yearns for this freedom, but the end of the story sees him left sitting alone in the schoolyard, bemoaning his inability to learn, his stupidity. The idealism that gave birth to the nation thus finds no reward in the civil society it has helped bring into being: by choosing to show the freedom fighter as a victim of the institution of formal learning, the authorial voice in the story counterposes spirit and order, and finds the latter wanting. Just two years on from the declaration of independence, it is as though the revolution is being closed down by a 'false' normality. The revolutionary youth is deprived of his self-belief by a social order that is out of touch with his historical circumstances.

A similar fate befalls an Indonesian seaman in another story from the first half of 1947, *Terondol* (Toer 2004: 42-45). In this case, a former Dutch East Indies sailor who has learned to fight against colonialism through his experiences in Australia, returns home to Jakarta to build a new life as a nationalist, not an employee of the Dutch. His personal life is in ruins (his wife has married another man in his absence and the gifts he has brought her and his children from Australia ('the Mecca of the Pacific') remind him of his loss) but he resolves to fight on, giving up the hope of personal happiness in favour of service to his homeland. Recovering from TB, he does all he can to find work as a '*pegawai Republik*'. The job never eventuates, however, and with his TB returned and his hopes and possessions gone, he dies in sorrow and destitution, another victim of the nation's inability to channel the idealism and the will to contribute of its erstwhile defenders.

Perhaps more directly recognisable as a companion to the 1957 *Cerita dari Jakarta* than stories like *Si Pandir* and *Terondol* is the 1952 story, *Kampungku*.⁹ For readers of Pramoedya, the opening paragraph strikes an immediately familiar tone:

⁸ This aspect of the story represents the autobiographical element that is present in so much of Pramoedya's writing of this period (see Teeuw 1967: 165).

⁹ This story was included in the second edition of *Cerita dari Jakarta* in 1963, though it is not part of the original 1957 collection. It was translated by Sumit K Mandal in *Indonesia* 61, April 1996.

Kawan, engkau sudah pernah dengar nama kampungku, bukan? Kebun Jahe Kober – 500 meter garis lurus dari istana. Dan engkau pun sudah tahu juga, bukan? Got-gotnya diselubungi tai penduduk kampung. Memang kemarin pak lurah sudah jatuhkan perintah: tak boleh lagi berak di got. Dan reaksi pertama ialah: seorang tetanggaku memberakkan anaknya di got orang lain, bukan di gotnya sendiri. Dan di malam hari demikian juga halnya dengan orang-orang yang sudah dewasa. (Toer 2004: 89)

Friend, you've heard the name of my kampung, haven't you? Kebun Jahe Kober – 500 metres in a straight line from the presidential palace. And you know all about it, don't you? Its drains are covered in the shit of its residents. Our local headman did recently bring down an order: no more shitting in the drains. And the first reaction was: one of my neighbours had his child shit in someone else's drain, not in his own. And once night fell, all the adults did the same.

The squalor announced here with an ironic tone of pure normality is the setting for a story of life (and more importantly, death) amid the overcrowded conditions and fetid canals in the kampungs of Jakarta – all within the shadow of the presidential palace, the symbol of Indonesia's so recently-proclaimed nationhood. It is a story of untimely and preventable deaths, the frequency with which the angel Gabriel visits the laneway in which the narrator lives.¹⁰ One of his neighbours is a typesetter who dies in great pain after a failed operation to treat the poisoning of his pancreas by his work exposure to lead: fifteen days earlier Gabriel also took the man's baby, dead of an attack of typhus that goes untreated. Death is rampant in this kampung, the result of ignorance and corruption, while religion remains out of touch with human suffering: the kampung boys race each other to beat the mosque drum to mark each death, 'because the kiais have promised them rewards in the afterlife for this service'. Along the way, the narrator places the blame firmly at the government's door:

Kalau pembunuhan dengan senjata dihukum oleh pemerintah, pembunuhan karena kebodohan dan kemiskinan tidak dilarang dikampungku, sekalipun pembunuhan itu dikerjakan atas anak sendiri. Ini keadaan biasa dan barangkali juga sudah selayaknya begitu.

While the government punishes killing with guns, killing that comes out of ignorance and poverty is not forbidden in my kampung, even when people kill their own children. This is the normal course of events, and maybe that's the way it is meant to be.

Finally, the proximity of the narrator's kampung to the presidential palace is reaffirmed, with an added barb directed at the implied reader:

¹⁰ In the second volume of his *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu*, published in 1997, Pramoedya made it clear that this story is also based on personal experience. Describing the circumstances of his life in 1950, he refers to 'Kebon Jahe Kober' as the former name of Tanah Abang I, '300 metres from the Gambir palace' (Toer 1997: 174, 180). It was where his first wife was living when he was released from prison at the end of the Revolution, and the poverty and squalor described in the story mirrors Pramoedya's recollections of his first visit to her in the kampung (Toer 1997: 177-178).

Beginilah keadaan kampungku dengan jibrilnya yang giat. Dan engkau, kawan, suatu kali boleh juga datang ke kampungku. Kampungku pun bisa jadi kampung turis yang akan mengayakan jiwa. Dan mencarinya pun tidak susah, karena tiap orang di Jakarta tahu di mana istana negara berdiri. Lima ratus meter garis lurus di sebelah barat daya, di sanalah kampung berdiri megah menentang para dokter dan para teknikus. (Toer 2004: 97-98)

This is what things are like in my kampung with its busy gabriel. And you, my friend, you should come and see it for yourself some time. It might even become a tourist kampung, enriching the souls of visitors. And it's not hard to find, because everyone in Jakarta knows where the state palace stands. Five hundred metres in a straight line to the southwest, that's where the kampung stands in all its glory, facing off against the doctors and technicians.

For the tourist, all this is 'surprising'; for the kampung residents, however, it is everyday reality. When the mosque drum announces another death, they merely look at each other and ask, 'Who was it who died?' ('*Siapa sih yang mati?*') Someone replies, 'It's that what's-his-name,' ('*si Polan*'), and a sense of mutual understanding settles on the conversation ('*Dan kemudian percakapan ditutup oleh saling mengerti*').

The bleak view of the nation's inability to lift its citizens out of poverty, ignorance and despair is not conveyed here through personal reflections on the life of the writer, as is the case with *Sunyisenyap di Siang Hidup* four years later. The bitter irony has not yet given way to *Sunyisenyap*'s emotional frustration and despair, though it is arguably much darker in tone. Yet stories like *Kampungku*, published in magazines in the early 1950s, make it clear that the betrayal of revolutionary idealism and the urgency of the need for social change were themes that were present in Pramoedya's writing from its inception. There is not yet any sense of how change is to be effected, but even at this stage, it is hard to see this writing as 'detached' in the manner, say, of Idrus, or as searching for the 'universal', as H B Jassin's understanding of 'universal humanism' urged upon Indonesian writers. By contrast, Pramoedya's writing is contextualised in local realities and the urgency of Indonesia's material needs.

The view from the Netherlands

Kampungku was published in *Mimbar Indonesia* in July 1952. In the following year, Pramoedya again used the story's characteristic style of ironic observation and conversational address to the implied reader in a much lighter context, that of a travel report entitled *Kapal Gersang*, a wry description of his shipboard companions and their interactions on the long voyage between Jakarta and Amsterdam (Toer 2004: 142-155).¹¹ Pramoedya and his family arrived in the Netherlands to begin a six-month residency sponsored by Sticusa on 15 June 1953, just before the Foundation's symposium on modern Indonesian literature was held in Amsterdam on 26 June of the same year. The symposium was addressed by two prominent Indonesian writer/intellectuals, Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana and Asrul Sani,

¹¹ The 'lighter' tone would again appear to have been shaped by personal experience. In *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu*, Pramoedya recalled how enjoyable he had found the voyage (Toer 1997: 192).

while Dr Sam Udin, who was about to take up a post with the ILO in Geneva, attended at short notice in place of a third (unnamed) speaker who was unable to attend. Dutch participants included a youthful Hans Teeuw, recently returned from four years in Indonesia and already installed as Professor of Comparative and General Linguistics at the University of Utrecht, along with another two Dutch professors who were to play an important part in Pramoedya's life, Han Resink and Wim Wertheim. Pramoedya was present at the symposium, and one of his first essays written in the Netherlands was a report on this meeting and a personal engagement with the views he had heard expressed there. The title of his essay, *Mencari sebab-sebab: Kemunduran Kesusastraan Indonesia Modern Dewasa Ini* indicates that it was the speakers' contributions to the debates then taking place in Jakarta on a perceived loss of energy and output among Indonesian writers that sparked Pramoedya's attention.

The topic appears to have been most directly addressed in the long and comprehensive discussion by Asrul Sani, entitled *De Indonesische letterkunde als spiegel van de maatschappij* (Indonesian literature as a mirror of society). Echoing views already put in Jakarta, Asrul suggested in his talk that the energy of the Indonesian revolution had become lost in political posturing, and a sense of unease at what people saw emerging around them had come to pervade the social and cultural life of independent Indonesia's cities. Most provocatively, he suggested that the core of the problem lay in the loss of the revolutionary blurring of the distinction between urban and rural culture. In independent Indonesia, urban culture had alienated art from life, in a way that did not occur in the world of the village; for writers of literature, this meant that there was a need to escape the influence of Western forms and Western literary trends, and recapture their indigenous roots, working out a secure basis on which they could begin dialogue with the West (Sani 1953:823).

In the Sticusa reports of the discussions which followed each of the presentations to the symposium, Pramoedya's name does not appear as one of the respondents to the views expressed by each of the speakers.¹² However in his essay reporting on the symposium, which was published in *Siasat* on 19 July 1953, he emerges as one of its most vociferous critics. Dismissing the Indonesian contribution as the voice of 'salon intellectuals' who take their own condition as representative of the whole, he sees the symposium overall as contributing only to the growth of an uprooted intelligentsia who have little to contribute to the condition they are identifying. He does not appear to reject the analysis itself, agreeing that the unravelling of the revolutionary spirit that previously united outlooks and endeavours in Indonesia has led to a general 'spiritual confusion', a cacophony of individual pursuits without a common purpose. But unlike Asrul Sani, he does not feel the need to be offering solutions, suggesting that the confusion may be the reflection of a lack of opportunities to gather and order energies, that will resolve itself in time. Likewise the decline that has been identified in the production of literature may simply mean that writers are taking stock and gathering their forces, and should not be taken to mean that they are 'not working'. In this climate, the important thing is the 'reconstitution of the spirit', presumably the spirit of revolution.¹³

¹² A whole issue of the Sticusa digest, *Cultureel Nieuws Indonesië 1953* (nr 30), is devoted to the texts of each of the presentations and the discussion which followed, in which contributors are named individually. In his later memoirs, Pramoedya confirms his silence in the discussions at the seminar (Toer 1997: 196).

¹³ The fact that Pramoedya and his family were living on the same floor of an Amsterdam house as Asrul Sani and his wife in 1953 (Toer 1997: 173) serves as a reminder that the printed word is only a

In his response to both Asrul Sani and Takdir Alisjahbana, Pramoedya appears to reject the idea that it is confrontation with the West and the loss of roots in an ‘indigenous’ (Asrul) or ‘Eastern’ (Takdir) heritage that lies behind the so-called malaise affecting post-independence Indonesian literature. Indeed, in another, more personal, essay of the time *Berkenalan dengan Utuy T Sontani*, he specifically denies that it is a ‘Western pessimism’ that is affecting Indonesian writers. Acknowledging that Sontani appears to be the epitome of a spirit of pessimism among Indonesian writers, Pramoedya nevertheless asserts very strongly that this ‘pessimism’ is not a Western import, but the result of the ‘idiocy’ which Indonesian writers see around them (*ketololan keliling*). Whereas in the West the spirit of pessimism is the result of economic factors and a shrinking in opportunities for action on the part of writers and intellectuals, in Indonesia it is a response to the ‘stupidity’ of the ‘majority of Indonesians’ and their focus on self-satisfaction. Sontani himself despairs at the absence of any intellectual curiosity among Indonesia’s leaders – they live in fine houses without any books in them – and Pramoedya expresses his agreement with this assessment. It is this situation that makes Sontani look ‘paralysed’ and withdrawn into his ‘Sundanese-ness’; all he can do in the face of his despair is to retreat, into a study of world literature and a focus on his family (Toer 2004: 193-197).

The subject of ‘Western pessimism’ emerges again in another important essay of 1953, Pramoedya’s report of his interview with Professor Wertheim, again on the topic of the literary ‘malaise’ and its causes (*Prof. Dr. Wertheim tentang Kesusastaan Indonesia Modern, Kegagalan kesusastaan Indonesia modern: kegagalan revolusi*). In this essay, Pramoedya reports that Wertheim agrees with the notion of a malaise or crisis affecting modern Indonesian literature, and sees it as the result of a pessimism that is an unconscious outcome of a loss of faith in the revolution, ‘translated’ in the works of Idrus, Achdiat and Utuy. (Even the optimism of *Keluarga Gerilya*, Wertheim tells the novel’s author, is an individual, rather than a collective, optimism.¹⁴) In Wertheim’s view, Indonesian writers have no reason to be adopting this ‘Western’ pessimism: in contrast to Holland, which has now played out its role in history, a great future lies before Indonesia, and its writers should play their part in giving expression to the will and the feelings of its people. Wertheim uses Mexico as a positive role model for Indonesian writers: the energy of its writers and their expression of the aspirations of its people show that the literature of a new state does not need to be propagandistic to fulfil its historical role. For this reason, Wertheim approved of Asrul Sani’s presentation to the Amsterdam symposium, seeing it as indicating one way out of the circularity that was continuing to lock Indonesian writers into dead-end responses to their historical circumstances.

An interesting aspect of aspect of the views Wertheim expressed to Pramoedya on the situation of Indonesian writers concerned the question of language, and the difficulty of using Indonesian as a language of literature. Wertheim himself was born and lived his early life in St Petersburg, and in an suggestive analogy with Indonesia, he told Pramoedya that for this reason, Russian, not Dutch, was his ‘language of family, of intimacy’. This meant, he said, that literature in Russian was still more meaningful to him than literature in Dutch. In the Indonesian case, writers who were not themselves from Malay-speaking areas experienced great difficulty in

partial record of the personal and intellectual exchanges of that time (or, indeed, of any other time and place).

¹⁴ A decade later, Pramoedya would make the same criticism of his own novel, in his 1963 seminar paper, *Realisme Sosialis dan Sastra Indonesia*.

producing literature that spoke of the emotional life. Those who succeeded in producing literature in Indonesian did so only through their stylistic strength. ‘Style’ was their only recourse when they did not (yet) have the ability to articulate in Indonesian the nuances of their inner lives, something that for them was still only possible in a regional language (Toer 2004: 286-295).¹⁵

As Tony Day has shown, the notion of the language of family, the ‘*bahasa keluarga*’, later surfaced in Pramoedya’s own writing on language and literature (Day 2002). It lay at the heart of a series of five articles under the title *Penilaian Kembali Kesusastraan Daerah/Klasik*, which Pramoedya published three years later, coincidentally at the time of his visit to China in late 1956 (Toer 1956). His ongoing, and later more vociferous, commitment to Indonesian as the language of national consciousness makes it difficult to determine precisely the ultimate impact of Wertheim’s notion of the ‘language of family’ in Pramoedya’s thought world. However in my view, this surfacing of the question of language is indicative of an important overall trend in Pramoedya’s essays from the Netherlands in 1952, which is a growing attention to the social context of literature and literary production. This, I believe, is what sets Pramoedya’s writing apart from the more formalist approaches to literary criticism emerging out of the ‘universal humanism’ of the period, and lays the conceptual foundation for his later move into a politicised understanding of the needs and responsibilities of writers in a newly emerging nation such as Sukarno’s Indonesia.

In *Kesusastraan Sebagai Alat*, first published in July 1952, a year before Pramoedya arrived in the Netherlands, this understanding of literature as a social product was already becoming clear. In this essay (Toer 2004: 222-231), Pramoedya expresses unequivocally his belief that literature is given meaning in its ‘use’ for a particular purpose, which may be quite independent of a writer’s aims and intentions. In this sense, a work of literature is an ‘instrument’ or a ‘tool’ (*alat*) – something with a material existence. In an anticipation of the struggle a decade later between LEKRA figures and their political mentors in the PKI, however, Pramoedya argued that acknowledging literature’s material existence in this way was a separate matter from the recognition that literature as a social product could also be ‘manipulated’ (*diperalat*) for political propaganda purposes. Interestingly, his domestic illustrations of this phenomenon – which made literature limiting to the writer and not challenging to society – were the magazine literature both of the Japanese Occupation and contemporary Java (‘which sings of the greatness of government officials, with the bupati as the epitome of idealism’). Internationally, the example was literature under Maoism. In Pramoedya’s view, Mao’s dictum that ‘literature and art must serve the people, especially the workers, peasants and soldiers’ placed an expectation on the writer that was no different from saying that a waiter in a restaurant had an obligation to satisfy his customers. In other words, the writer produces the social product which is literature. The ‘use’ to which it is put in society is determined by forces outside the act of production itself.

At first sight, it may appear that this clear rejection of the Maoist notion of literature’s social function confirms the conventional view of a ‘reversal’ in Pramoedya’s attitudes after 1956. It is likely, however, that what is happening at this point in Pramoedya’s development is rather the beginning of an engagement with debates within socialist thought, rather than a liberal humanist distancing from them.

¹⁵ Note also the comments on this essay by Scherer (1981: 137). Farid (n.d.: 4) comments that the meeting between Pramoedya and Wertheim at this time was the beginning of a life-long friendship.

In one of his essays from the Netherlands, *Ada Humanisme di Oranje Nassaulaan-5 dan: Komunisme Telah Mati Bersama Lenin* (Toer 2004: 198-204), Pramoedya gave extensive coverage to a talk by Henk van Galen Last, an editor of the Dutch journal *Libertinage*, to a meeting held to discuss the subject of humanism, organised by Aoh K Hadimadja as a follow-up to the Sticusa Amsterdam literary symposium. Pramoedya describes Van Galen Last as arguing that communism was an expression of humanism, but that communism itself had died along with Lenin, leaving the present-day Soviet Union under the control of nihilists with no belief in anything. Pramoedya notes that Van Galen Last's views show the influence of Ter Braak's opposition to totalitarianism, indicating that he himself is engaging with Western ideas, and the 'big picture' debates and discussions that characterised Western European thought of the time.

Another essay of 1953, *Definisi Keindahan Dalam Kesusasteraan* (Toer 2204: 173-179), adds to this picture of Pramoedya's engagement with those aspects of Western thought of the time that are distancing literature from both the Romantic heritage and the formalist direction in modernist literary criticism. In this essay, Pramoedya argues that the 'classical' or 'romantic' association of literature with beauty, something 'acquired in school' (and hence not seen here as a part of indigenous Indonesian literary heritage), needs to be questioned. In the modern world, he says, literature has a function broader than just 'beauty', as it now takes on concerns that cannot be subsumed under the notion of 'beauty', such as 'justice, humanity, morality, even nationalism'. Drawing on a range of Western examples, such as Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*, and Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Pramoedya suggests that the literary climate now inhabited by modern writers (and here Indonesian writers are clearly part of a world community) is characterised by a 'bitter realism' ('*realisme pahit*'), that does not offer the reader 'beauty' but a confrontation with the world 'as it is'. Clearly, what is happening here is a growing sociological, or even materialist, understanding of literature. The modern world, as Pramoedya perceives it, gives literature both its context and its meaning.

Lines of engagement

The range of ideas and positionings which Pramoedya was articulating in his essays of 1952 and 1953 were applied most directly to an engagement with the Indonesian literary debates of the period in *Offensif Kesusasteraan – 1953*, published in *Siasat* in March 1953 (Toer 2004: 163-172). This essay was Pramoedya's reply to an 'offensive' against the literary 'malaise', which he believed had been launched by the Gelanggang group in an end of year radio address on the state of Indonesian literature by H B Jassin in 1952. In his address, which Pramoedya says had attracted a lot of attention, Jassin had argued that in order to protect the 'purity' ('*kemurnian*') of a literary work, the writer must always maintain a clarity of thought and feeling in regard to himself, his surroundings and his society, to guard against a confusion and blurring of his standards.¹⁶ To Pramoedya, this notion of the 'pure artist' failed to acknowledge the reality of the writer's material circumstances, and posed a notion of social responsibility that was divorced from any real social context. In a prequel to his views on the Amsterdam symposium some three months later, Pramoedya dismissed the concern with the literary 'malaise', arguing that a period of preparation, struggle

¹⁶ Given the unquestioned masculinist bias of the Indonesian literary world at this time, the gendered pronoun seems appropriate here.

and assessment was all a part of the creative process. Foreshadowing also his rejection of ‘Romantic’ notions of art and beauty in *Definisi Keindahan Dalam Kesusastraan*, Pramoedya suggested as well that Jassin’s separation of the ‘pure artist’ from the rough and tumble of society meant denying Indonesian writers the right to pursue a decent material interest, and condemning them to a sequestered life like that of ‘the Bronte sisters’.

To this point, there is a clear cross-over and consistency of ideas and approaches in the way Pramoedya brings his intellectual development to bear on the Indonesian literary debates of 1953 in this essay. However something less ‘intellectual’ but perhaps no less consistent with Pramoedya’s later career also makes itself strongly felt in this essay, that is, the highly personalised *ad hominem* direction with which Pramoedya pursues his differences with Jassin and the Gelanggang group. Taking strong exception to what he sees as Jassin’s ‘hobby’ of constructing his own images of those writers he finds wanting in some way and then proceeding to destroy them, Pramoedya is at pains to expose Jassin as himself a ‘failed writer’ who, having no creative reputation of his own, is intent on destroying the reputation of the writers he is critiquing. The narrowness of Jassin’s world, Pramoedya asserts, means that he, of all people, has no business in calling genuinely creative writers to account in the way that he does. So far so good, perhaps, but there is a nasty sting in the tail of Pramoedya’s criticism:

Tetapi ini dapat dimaafkan kalau diingat bahwa daerah perjalanan Jassin sangat terbatas: kantor, rumahnya sendiri, rumah Balfas dan rumah-rumah mereka yang ia tidak kenal tetapi yang ia suka mampir sebentar untuk membuktikan bahwa ia pun punya jenis sebagai makhluk. (Toer 2004: 167)

But this can be pardoned, if we remember how limited Jassin’s range of movement is: the office, his own home, Balfas’s home and the homes of those he doesn’t know but whom he is in the habit of dropping in on, just to prove that he is a sexual being.

The essay concludes in similar fashion:

Dan dengan ini offensif Jassin dijawab, disambut.
Dan dengan ini fokkerij kesusastraan Jassin telah bubar!
Dan dengan ini, adieu kritikus H B Jassin! (Toer 2004: 172)

And herewith Jassin’s offensive is answered, given a response.
And herewith Jassin’s literary animal breeding farm has had its day!
And herewith, farewell to the critic H B Jassin!

The inclusion of Balfas’s name in Pramoedya’s description of the narrowness of Jassin’s world offers a clue to what lies behind this ugly parodying of Jassin and his literary ‘fokkerij’: both Jassin himself and Balfas, another member of the Gelanggang group, had by this time both published critical remarks of Pramoedya’s writing, finding it lacking by the criteria of the formalist, and ‘universal humanist’ approaches to literature. Indeed, in her study, Scherer suggests that Pramoedya’s *Offensif Kesusastraan – 1953* owed as much to his fury at Balfas’s December 1952 assessment of *Keluarga Gerilya* and Mochtar Lubis’s *Jalan Tak Ada Ujung* as examples of ‘weak’ novels that illustrated their writers’ lack of skill in controlling their material,

as it did to Jassin's own 'offensive' of the same month (Scherer 1981: 134-135, Heinschke 1996: 158).¹⁷

The nature of Pramoedya's response, and his personalising of the debate at this point, emerges again, though in more muted form, in another essay of 1953, *Sumber Cipta Dalam Kesusasteraan* (Toer 2004: 214-221). On this occasion, Pramoedya is responding to an article by Hamka, in which this well-known and highly-regarded pre-war author had suggested that while contemporary writers might initially find themselves attracted to influences from outside Indonesia like the writing of Hemingway and Steinbeck, in the end no writer of any character would want to be a mere 'follower' ('Pak Turut'). Perhaps seeing himself as one of those writers Hamka was implying were 'lacking in character', Pramoedya launched into an extended refutation in his reply, arguing that the sort of influence Hamka was referring to was not something 'evil'; in fact, for a writer, 'filling the empty spaces in one's soul is a necessity and a joy, and something always ongoing'. The context here was again the idea of a literary 'malaise', and Pramoedya once more argued against any suggestion that the 'decline' which others were perceiving in Indonesian literature at the time, like the allegations of 'pessimism', was the result of Western influence. Only if a artist stops searching does he become 'sluggish' (*lesu*), because he is imprisoning himself within limits he himself has created. Implicitly, this is the state of mind Pramoedya identifies in Hamka:

Sekalipun Hamka yang telah beranak biak takkan mungkin memiliki juga seluruh perasaan, pemikiran dan perasaan seorang anak sekolah menengah. Macam-macam kekosongan ada di jiwa tiap orang. (Toer 2004: 216)

Even Hamka, who [is of an age where he] has reproduced his own kind, can't possibly have all the feelings, thoughts and perceptions of a high school student. Various forms of emptiness exist in the spirits of everyone.

As is the case with Pramoedya's attack on Jassin (and arguably would remain the case in the much more heated climate of the 1960s), it is not so much the ideas Pramoedya is advancing here, as the language he chooses to express them in that can be seen as reducing an intellectual debate to an *ad hominem* assault. Jassin does not have an emerging 'school' of literary critics around him, but an 'animal breeding farm'; the narrowness of his world encompasses his visits to those who allow him to 'prove that he is a sexual being'. Hamka is not 'middle aged' but has 'reproduced his own kind';¹⁸ he should be aware that he can't command the whole range of experience of any 'high school student'. If the seeds of Pramoedya's intellectual development are beginning to grow in these essays, so too, perhaps, are the emotional responses that would later be held so strongly against him.

¹⁷ Balfas's criticism appeared in an article entitled 'Apa Sebab Kurang Roman?', published in *Siasat* on 14 December 1952. In another reminder of the 'informal' counterpart to the printed word, however, Pramoedya also recorded, long after Balfas's death, the following anecdote from 1950: 'M. Balfas, dalam suatu pertemuan tak disengaja, mengatakan padaku: Kau sudah bukan menulis lagi, Pram, kau berak.' (Toer 1997: 186). The context is Pramoedya's attempt to make a living out of writing, but if Pramoedya's recollections are correct, he was not the only one to engage in offensive language. Perhaps here the distinction between the written and the un-written comes into play, to Pramoedya's disadvantage.

¹⁸ The term '*beranak biak*' is in fact normally confined to descriptions of animal behaviour (cf. *beranak pinak*).

It remains clear even amid the invective, however, that if the lines of a cultural politics between ‘left’ and ‘right’ are taking shape in the exchanges between Pramoedya and those he perceives as opponents, there is no sense in which the ‘left’ viewpoint is associating the ‘right’ with a negative ‘West’. The association of the left with anti-imperialism and anti-Westernism has become so pervasive since the era of the Cold War that it is important not to lose sight of the fact that in the Indonesian literary and cultural debates of the 1950s and 60s, there was a shared commitment to modernity along Western European lines that overrode the sharpening lines of political engagement and conflict of the period. In literary terms, this openness to influence from the West is clear in Pramoedya’s engagement with Hamka on behalf of those writers, like himself, who find ‘spiritual nourishment’ in the work of writers like Hemingway and Steinbeck (or, in fact, the countless other Western writers whose names appear in Pramoedya’s essays of this time).¹⁹ And a brief consideration of those essays in which Pramoedya records his observations of Dutch society during his time in the Netherlands in 1953 leaves no doubt that his attraction to, and even admiration of, Western European modernity is not confined to matters of literature alone.

‘Much better than in Indonesia’

A striking example of the way his observations in the Netherlands gave Pramoedya a sense of the urgent need for the development of modern social attitudes and institutions in the new Indonesia occurs in the opening paragraph of an essay entitled *Famili Tanus yang Buta*:

Terlepas dari perhitungan politik atau apa pun juga, sistem pendidikan di negeri Belanda jauh lebih baik daripada di Indonesia. Bahkan orang-orang cacad, yang kini di Indonesia boleh dikatakan hanya mungkin hidup dari kasihan orang belaka, atau setidak-tidaknya mempergunakan kekurangannya sebagai alat untuk mencari penghasilan, di negeri kecil ini pun mempunyai hak untuk mendapat didikan yang selayaknya, sehingga dengan demikian dalam kehidupan mereka tidak merasa rendah daripada anggota-anggota masyarakat yang lain. (Toer 2004: 180)

Regardless of any political considerations, [it must be said that] the education system in the Netherlands is much better than in Indonesia. In this small country even disabled people, who these days in Indonesia can be said to be dependent on people’s pity for their survival, or, at the very least, to exploit their disability as a means to obtain an income, have the right to a decent education. This means that they don’t feel inferior to other members of society as they go about their lives.

In this essay, Pramoedya’s interest in the variety of human experience leads him to reflect on the value of modern education and learning as a means of enriching

¹⁹ As an aside, it may be noted that the explorations in European literature of this time that may have been the source of what is now the most well-known title among Pramoedya’s novels. In a 1957 essay, *Keadaan Sosial Parapengarang Indonesia*, Pramoedya referred to a translation by Rivai Apin of Saint Exupéry’s 1939 novel, *Terre des Hommes*. Rivai’s Indonesian version was entitled *Bumi Manusia* (Toer 2004: 524). One wonders whether Pramoedya or Rivai recalled this earlier usage when Pramoedya’s *Bumi Manusia* appeared in 1980.

the inner life, something he sees as denied to so many people in Indonesia. Elsewhere, the Dutch example serves to provoke critical responses in him to the attitudes of the Indonesian people themselves, and the need for a change in a mindset that inhibits the growth of independence and self-reliance. In *Perusahaan-Perusahaan Mahasiswa Belanda*, for example, he begins with a comment on the need for material and financial sufficiency as a precondition for the pursuit of education and skills. In Indonesia, he says, many students without an income can be found sitting around ('*bercokol*') in government offices, contributing just a fraction of their energies in return for full pay, and leaving work all the time with 'classes' as their excuse. Just as is the case with the earlier example of the condition of disabled people, this situation compares very poorly with what Pramoedya has observed in the Netherlands:

Di Nederland, golongan mahasiswa tidak minta dimanjakan, dan mereka pun tidak mempunyai kesempatan untuk bermanja. Karenanya pula mereka kelihatan lebih bebas, dan dari golongan yang tiada berpenghasilan nampak sikap mereka yang mendasarkan perjuangan hidup mereka pada kekuatan diri sendiri. (Toer 2004: 186)

In the Netherlands, university students don't ask to be indulged, and neither do they get the chance to indulge themselves. And for that reason they seem more independent. As a group in society without an income they show an attitude of looking to their own resources to sustain their livelihoods.

The essay describes a range of self-help enterprises which students in Dutch universities have founded, and the sorts of activities and incomes they generate. Pramoedya's concluding comment again looks unfavourably at the contrasting situation in Indonesia:

Dan yang mengagumkan ialah, bahwa perusahaan mereka ini bukanlah bersifat main-main dan hanya mengharapkan bantuan pemerintah melulu, karena bantuan yang demikian tidak gampang itu bisa diterima seperti halnya dengan di Indonesia. (Toer 2004: 192)

An the amazing thing is that these enterprises of theirs are not just fronts designed to attract government support, because this sort of support isn't easily accessible, as is the case in Indonesia.

The question of independent initiative, rather than a reliance on government support, is also an issue for arts practitioners. In *Galerie Le Canard, Sebuah Gelanggang Kesenian yang Menarik* (Toer 2004: 257-262), Pramoedya looks at the positive role being played by 'this arena of modest circumstances with such a grand name, Galerie Le Canard' in extending knowledge and understanding of all forms of the Indonesian arts among the Dutch public. Noting that in Europe there is a 'greater sense' of art as part of the totality and indwelling character of a nation, he applauds the existence of this Amsterdam gallery, as both an educative body and a forum for avant-garde artists 'from all competing streams and groups' to put forward their ideas and display their work. Just as in the case of student enterprises it is 'amazing' that there is no expectation of government support, so too is it 'strange' that initiatives such as the Galerie Le Canard are completely self-supporting, and receive no government subsidies. In this case, public support sustains the initiative financially,

something that Pramoedya recognises as unimaginable in Indonesia at this time. For this reason he looks to the Indonesian government, or one of its agencies like the National Culture Council (BMKN), to take the initiative in recognising the role of art in the life of the nation and to fulfil the unquestionable need for similar solidly-based institutions to be established in Indonesia.

One case where government intervention in the Netherlands is seen to point to what needs to be done in Indonesia concerns the writing of national literary history. In *Perkembangan Prosa Indonesia, Titik Pangkal dalam Kesusastraan Indonesia* (Toer 2004: 246-250), Pramoedya ponders the need for a proper Indonesian literary history, a study of the links in the chain, the continuities and new discourses that go to make up the evolution of the nation's modern literature. A Dutch example of what is needed and what can be done is the appearance of a 532 page history of the 19th century literary journal *De Nieuwe Gids*, the active life of which spanned no more than 5 years. (Pramoedya notes that the journal is of significance for Indonesia, because it was the mouthpiece of the [18]80s movement, which is seen to have introduced the idea of modern 'form' to the pre-war generation of modern Indonesian poets.) This particular study was made possible through a subsidy from the Dutch Ministry of Education and Culture, and Pramoedya concludes his essay by looking forward to a time when the sorts of understandings that made this history possible in the Netherlands will also become common practice in Indonesia. Earlier on, however, he had noted that present day conditions in Indonesia are not conducive to the writing of this kind of detailed, careful study. Significantly, and perhaps for the first time in these essays, he locates the reason for these conditions in the 'decay and disintegration in all forms of life brought about by the constellation of party political life thus far'. In other words, if the social institutions and personal outlooks characteristic of Dutch modernity are clearly pointing out the need for equivalent practices in Indonesia, there is a suggestion here that a party political system also derived from Western Europe might not be the best way to foster these practices in independent Indonesia.²⁰

Confronting the challenge

One of Pramoedya's last essays written in the Netherlands is an intensely personal reflection, closing this chapter in his writing in the same way that *Kapal Gersang*, his wry description of people and circumstances on the voyage from Jakarta, had opened it up. This time, however, the tone is highly emotional and inward looking, rather than detached and externally focussed. *Suatu Pojok di Suatu Dunia* is an autobiographical reflection on the love of a father for his children, occasioned by his farewelling of his wife and two children as they set out before him on the return voyage to Indonesia. Perhaps here, in his emotional life, we find a more 'Javanese' Pramoedya, declaring he is not ashamed to weep repeatedly for the loss of his children:

²⁰ The admiration Pramoedya felt for the achievements of Dutch modernity, viewed as independent of its politics and its practice of colonialism, remained with him all his life, perhaps to the discomfort of some admirers of his postcolonial credentials. In his 1997 memoirs, he wrote, with disarming frankness: 'Negeri Belanda memperlihatkan padaku bagaimana indahnya masyarakat yang teratur, bagaimana setiap jasa dihargai dan bagaimana setiap orang berhak mendapatkan penghidupannya. Dalam hal ini Belanda adalah seorang guru yang terlalu baik, dan Indonesia murid yang tidak baik. Aku pikir dalam waktu tiga ratus lima puluh tahun Indonesia tidak cukup belajar dari dia' (Toer: 1997: 205).

Dan aku merasa bangga punya sentimen kekeluargaan demikian. Terutama sekali ini terasa, di kemudian hari sewaktu keadaan menjadi berubah dan bergeser, dan yang menyebabkan anak-anak itu begitu jauh daripada kehidupanku, seperti di tempat asing, di tempat yang tak nyata, tak di atas bumi dan tidak duniaku ini.

Namun, betapapun juga yang terjadi, tak adalah yang dapat membatalkan ayah bagi anaknya, dan anak bagi ayahnya. (Toer 2004: 360)

And I felt proud to have such a strong sense of family. I [will] feel this especially in the future, when circumstances have changed and shifted, and moved my children so far away from my own life, as though in a foreign land, somewhere unreal, not part of this earth, or my own world.

Yet whatever might happen, there is nothing that can annul [the importance of] a father for his children, or of children for their father.

Once Pramoedya himself has returned to Jakarta, in early 1954, this tone of personal intimacy is replaced by a clarity of thought and approach being brought to bear on the question of literature and social commitment in postcolonial Indonesia. These two concerns – the business of being a writer and the task of nation-building – are never separate in his thought; the challenges are clearly defined and the responses are unwavering. There is a sense of having moved on from questions of ‘crisis’ or ‘malaise’, and while the West remains a source of energy and example, both in terms of literary modernity and the institutions of a modern society, there is a growing confidence about the role of literature and its writers in the realities of their own social context.

These themes are all strongly present in a long essay from 1954 entitled *Perjuangan Kesusasteraan Indonesia Yang Lalu dan Yang Akan Datang* (Toer 2004: 321-340). Here, the questions addressed at the Amsterdam symposium of the previous year, and the expectations of foreign observers of Indonesian literature – including those of Wertheim – are dismissed as irrelevant to the essential challenge confronting Indonesian literature at the time. Westerners, Pramoedya says, ask the wrong questions, like ‘Where is the Indonesian literature that portrays the Japanese Occupation?’ or ‘Why does Indonesian literature not have an Indonesian style?’, whereas the essential – and still unanswered – question confronting Indonesian literature is how ‘to create the Indonesian person (*‘manusia Indonesia’*) and give colour and structure to his/her life (*‘memberi warna dan corak kehidupannya’*).²¹ It is in this ‘local’ engagement and focus, which means writing about ‘self and nation’ (*‘masalah-masalah diri/bangsanya’*) that Indonesian literature will acquire its ‘international’ quality, without its writers needing to concern themselves with the

²¹ The juxtaposition here is instructive, just as much for our contemporary practice. The questions Western observers bring to bear on Indonesian literature tend to reflect an outsider’s perspective and a search for writing that interprets Indonesia to the world. For Indonesian writers and commentators, on the other hand, the acts of writing and debating continue to be driven by an insider’s engagement with the building of a national culture.

question of whether what they write will be acceptable or not to the international world.²²

The attention to the local requires a sense of active commitment on the part of the writer to the nation and its concerns. Pramoedya appears sympathetic to those 'many writers' who ended up being 'wounded' by their times, ending up disappointed, with a suspicion and mistrust of their own society, a reference to the times of perceived crisis. But in an anticipation of what was to become a standard critique on the part of LEKRA figures, his sympathy does not extend to the pioneer of the post-war Indonesian short story, Idrus. In the views he expresses here, Pramoedya regards Idrus as having ended up beholden to his own suspicions, rather than being able to find good will in his heart towards his surroundings. As a result, in his famous and controversial story, *Surabaya*, Idrus produced a reactionary statement about a society in motion, trying to find a new morality.²³

The increased focus here on the local, and the essential nexus of self and nation still does not lead Pramoedya to abandon the Western example. In fact, in acknowledging that his argument is emphasising the social function of literature, he draws on the examples of Multatuli, Ehrenburg, Tolstoi and Zola to illustrate that commitment, if it is undertaken with 'good will and honesty' does not preclude the lasting quality of literature that is entwined with social issues. However the basis in the local must be solid. Pramoedya asserts that it is not surprising that many writers are deracinated from their own traditions, and find themselves swallowing bits of Western philosophy that aren't always beneficial to their own development or that of the nation. Almost as though he is revisiting his mistrust of Asrul Sani's 'return to the village' call at the Amsterdam symposium, he calls for a recovery of indigenous character, agreeing that there is a need for writers to escape the big cities and get to know the regions (Toer 2004: 336). The 'literary modernity' which Pramoedya is defining here is very close to what would later become standard LEKRA thought and practice: there is no turning away from the example of Western modernity itself, but in its Indonesian application, modernity must be grounded in a real understanding of Indonesia's social and cultural needs.

The positive aspects of the Western example surface again in an unusual context in *Kesusastraan Kristen di Indonesia*, an essay written at the end of 1955 and published in *Star Weekly* in January 1956 (Toer 2004: 361-367). Acknowledging that one of the effects of the meeting between Europe and Indonesia has been to make Christianity a part of present day Indonesia's heritage, Pramoedya here calls on Christian publishers to cease producing texts for the Christian community alone ('*antara kita*') and encourage Christian writers to enter into engagement with society at large, on the basis of Christian morality. Interestingly, it is Graham Greene (*The Matter of the Affair*) and Alan Paton (*Cry, the Beloved Country*) that Pramoedya uses as examples of the benefit to a wider community of this kind of engagement. Referring to a number of publications by Christian publishers in Indonesia,

²² Interestingly, Pramoedya's example of a work that achieves this 'eternal' quality through its focus on 'matters of the self and the most national' ('*masalah-masalah diri serta yang paling nasional*') is Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. This, he says, also explains why the works Chairil Anwar wrote 'with honesty' are those that contain universal value ('*mengapa tulisan-tulisan Chairil yang dibuatnya secara jujur mengandung nilai universal*') (Toer 2004: 326).

²³ An extended comment on both Idrus and Chairil Anwar (Toer 2004: 327) also anticipates the later LEKRA view that while both were successful writers who succeeded in filling the creative vacuum of their times, Idrus's works were of doubtful benefit to his nation and society, while Chairil was sometimes too absorbed in his petty personal issues and difficulties. 'Self and nation', it appears, had always to be considered as a single entity.

Pramoedya also mentions a translation of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* as an example of a book that speaks to a much wider readership than the Christian community alone. But indicating that his earlier focus on the local does not discount the importance of an 'international' outlook among Indonesian readers of literature, he disapproves of the translator's adaptations of the original to suit Indonesian conditions. This, Pramoedya says, is patronising to Indonesian readers (Toer 2004: 365).

Related to this last point is the argument put forward in another essay of this period, *Tentang Matapelajaran Kesusastraan di Sekolah* (Toer 2004: 514-521). Here Pramoedya calls for a Westernised approach to the study of literature in schools and universities, resting on the idea of individual creativity with language, and moving away from the older idea that links 'sastra' with a mastery of 'beauty' in language. As such, the essay recalls the 1953 *Definisi Keindahan Dalam Kesusasteraan* discussed above, in which Pramoedya called for an understanding of the 'bitter realism' of modern literature and an abandonment of the linkage of literature and beautiful language that was something 'acquired in school'. Here, as throughout the essays of this period, and in line with the views of both right and left in the Indonesian literary world of the time, there is a commitment to a progressive and sophisticated modernity as the basis for a modern Indonesian literary culture. It is in this context that his call for Indonesian writers to 'return to the regions' and focus on 'local' realities needs to be understood: the 'Indonesian person' is to be a creation of a forward-looking modernity and not a return to past traditions. In cultural terms, the 'West' is not the enemy, however much the political dimensions of the Western presence still remain a question to be addressed.

An important essay that draws together some of these lines of argument and anticipates the focus on their wider political context in Pramoedya's next phase of development is *Tendensi Kerakyatan Dalam Kesusastraan Indonesia Terbaru* (Toer 2004: 455-461). Once again, the starting point here seems to be a reconsideration of Asrul Sani's contribution to the 1953 Amsterdam symposium. Just as Asrul called for a return to the village, while himself remaining a part of the city after his return to Indonesia, Pramoedya says, many young writers are following a tendency to write about people of the *desa*, while still not moving beyond the confines of the city themselves. This is as much true of LEKRA writers as it is of non-LEKRA, making both camps no more than 'tourists' in their approach to writing about Indonesian rural life. Indonesia does not yet have an Ignazio Silone, who has shown himself capable of entering into the inner life and struggles of the Italian peasantry, an indication that Indonesian writers need to be better aware of their own condition. In Pramoedya's view, those like Asrul Sani, who have made the call for a return to the village from the perspective of modern Europe, are unaware that they are merely picking up on a European problem, the acknowledgement that city life 'ala Western Europe' has failed. This 'failure' lies in the dependency of the European city on services and trade for its economic existence, without any anchors in the land, the source of life's essentials. Indonesia's cities are heading in the same direction, to be sure, but at this historical juncture, they are no more than heterogeneous groups of villages made up of people with an overall village mentality. Understanding this situation means that Indonesian writers ought to avoid equating their own historical circumstances with those of Western Europe. In Indonesia, the struggle is to avoid becoming 'tourists', to look towards a time when modern writers will emerge from the peasantry itself, or when there is no longer any distance between 'peasant' and 'non peasant', an emancipation of the peasantry in a sociological sense:

Tendensi kerakyatan dalam kesusastraan Indonesia ini kelak barangkali akan berhasil gemilang, tetapi bukanlah hal itu karena pidato Asrul Sani dalam simposium kesusastraan Indonesia di Amsterdam yang menganjurkan ‘kembali ke desa’, juga bukan karena Lekra secara ideologis beroperasi di daerah ini. Hasil ini akan tercapai apabila sifat-sifat turisme itu hilang, timbul pengarang yang dilahirkan dari kalangan petani sendiri, atau bila perkembangan sosiologis berhasil dapat menghapuskan jarak antara golongan petani dan yang bukan. Artinya, apabila telah terjadi emansipasi petani dalam pengertian sosiologis! (Toer 2004: 461).

Indonesian literature’s tendency to identify with the people may have a shining future, but it won’t be because of Asrul Sani’s call at the Amsterdam symposium on Indonesian literature for a ‘return to the village’. Neither will it come from Lekra’s operations in the village out of ideological convictions. It will be achieved when the tourism characteristics disappear, and writers appear who were born from the ranks of the peasants themselves, or when sociological developments succeed in wiping out the distance between peasant and non-peasant. That is, when there has been an emancipation of the peasantry in a sociological sense!

Clearly, in Pramoedya’s mind at this time, there is no contradiction between drawing positive lessons from European modernity, the leitmotif of so many of the essays discussed here, and being fully engaged in Indonesia’s historical circumstances. In *Tendensi Kerakyatan...* the issue still seems to be that it is European modernity that can point the way out of the ‘village mentality’ of Indonesia’s urban population, towards an enlightened understanding of what needs to be achieved in Indonesia. Perhaps in the spirit of Wertheim’s words to Pramoedya in 1953, the point is that Indonesia can still build its own future in a spirit of optimism, something Pramoedya sees as being achieved on the twin basis of a modern spirit and a clear sense of historical circumstances. To some extent, there is an intellectual tension between these two poles, because Indonesia’s ‘historical circumstances’ as a postcolonial nation logically require a ‘modernity’ that is not beholden to the colonial legacy. This, I would suggest, is the point of Pramoedya’s intellectual, cultural and political development in the period leading up to his first visit to China, in October 1956.

In his study of Chinese influence on Pramoedya, Hong Liu (1996: 129) describes an animated series of discussions between Pramoedya and a range of Chinese writers and cultural officials, that introduced Pramoedya to the Chinese version of socialist realism during his travels in China. Knowing what we do about Pramoedya’s thinking at this time, it is not hard to imagine how the Maoist blend of optimism, a modern spirit and historical awareness might have left him with a positive impression (over-riding the misgivings he had expressed in one comment in his *Kesusastraan Sebagai Alat* of 1952) of the Chinese literary doctrines and their potential adaptation to Indonesian conditions. Far from a reversal in his attitudes and beliefs, the progression to a heightened political understanding of the place of literature in Indonesia’s broader project of nation-building, which Pramoedya brought back from China in 1956, can be seen as a logical progression in the broad outlines of his thinking up to this time. At some point, he had to part company with the political legacy and contemporary presence of the West in postcolonial Indonesia. China

provided a model for how this could be done without closing the door that had been initially opened by the West, towards a progressive and enlightened modernity.

Taking off

The Indonesian verb *'menggelanding'*, chosen by the authors as the title for their collection of Pramoedya's stories and essays between 1947 and 1956, means 'to roll along' or 'get moving'; a secondary meaning is 'to taxi (of an aircraft)' (Stevens and Schmidgall-Tellings 2004: 308). As I hope to have shown, their choice of a title is an apt one. It conveys the sense of a gathering of strength prior to take off, not the change of course which earlier commentaries on Pramoedya's literary biography have tended to see in his identification with the political left in the period between 1957 and 1965. Regardless of history's ultimate judgement of how Pramoedya played out that commitment in Indonesia's years of anti-imperialist and revolutionary nationalism, it is time now to recognise that his early adulthood was a period of great intellectual excitement and exploration, which in large part followed the lines of an internal consistency and logical development. The young Pramoedya was 'on a roll', gathering momentum as he moved forward through the challenges of life as a writer in a newly independent nation. The written record made available through *Menggelanding I* offers us an insight into his journey.

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