

Why you should read 'This Earth of Mankind'*

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IN JANUARY 2014 JOSHUA OPPENHEIMER'S FILM on Indonesia, *The Act of Killing*, was nominated for an Academy Award, reflecting its penetration into mainstream film watching. Many people will be introduced to Indonesia by this vivid study of the country's ruling lumpen elite. Another, very different, introduction to Indonesia might be reading Pramoedya Ananta Toer's historical novel *Bumi Manusia* (*This Earth of Mankind*).

The English language edition of *This Earth of Mankind* was published by Penguin in 1983. The sequels to this novel, *Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps* and *House of Glass*, were published over the following several years by Penguin in Australia and the United Kingdom. They were launched into the United States by William Morrow, Hyperion and Penguin in the 1990s. As their translator, I am very pleased to see that they are still in print 30 years later, having had many reprints. The four novels are likely to appear soon as eBooks, Penguin USA having bought the eBook rights. They appear already to be advertised as eBooks for Kindle on Amazon.com.

Pramoedya's work has, on the whole, met with critical acclaim in the West, in particular the United States. The publication of other translations followed, such as *Silent Songs of a Mute*, *Fugitive*, *Girl from the Coast* and collections of short stories. In 1992 the *New York Times* reviewer wrote:

"Now comes a book of far greater scope and depth from independent Indonesia's greatest but still most controversial fiction writer, whose career spans more than 40 years. "This Earth of Mankind," the first in

a cycle of four novels, is the tale of a bittersweet coming of age in Java, Indonesia's dominant island, almost a century ago. Through it, we are taken back to the days of nascent Indonesian nationalism. But the author is a humanist, not a propagandist, and so his novel is also a wonderful example of the best storytelling tradition of his country." (Grosette 1992)

In 1996, after *House of Glass* appeared, the *Washington Post* reviewer wrote:

"The Buru Tetralogy is one of the 20th century's great artistic creations, a work of the richest variety, color, size and import, founded on a profound belief in mankind's potential for greatness and shaped by a huge compassion for mankind's weakness." (Ryan 1996)

Jamie James in his article "The Indonesiad" in *The New Yorker* wrote:

"Pramoedya's masterwork is the Buru Quartet, a cycle of novels set in the final, decadent years of Dutch colonialism in Java. The series follows the life of a revolutionary journalist named Minke. The first native Javanese boy to attend the elite Dutch colonial high school, Minke is full of idealistic notions about European progress. The process of his disillusionment and forging of his Indonesian identity – a new element in the periodic table of history – [forms] the novels' core. The Buru Quartet is saturated with the gothic gloom and steamy atmosphere of the rain forest. With the publication this month, by William Morrow, of the quartet's final volume, "House of Glass," and the paperback reissue, by Penguin, of its predecessors, "This Earth of Mankind," "Child of All Nations," and "Footsteps," American readers can now follow Pramoedya's saga of Minke – one of the most ambitious undertakings in postwar world literature – from beginning to end." (James 1996)

James's (1996) description of some of Pramoedya's style—"the Buru Quartet is saturated with the gothic gloom and steamy atmosphere of the rain forest"—speaks as to how the novels reach across cultures. The

reception in the US is a particularly convincing tribute to Pramoedya's storytelling and writing, remembering that Indonesia is almost invisible and unknown in the United States, unlike the situation in Australia.

The books which followed *This Earth of Mankind* and its sequels, *A Mute's Soliloquy*, *Fugitive and Girl from the Coast* (translated by John McGlynn), were also on the whole received with acclaim. Most of the reviews in the mainstream media in the West have been kind also to the English translations.

A Google search for *This Earth of Mankind* will bring up thousands of references. It is clear that this book, and to some extent its sequels, have entered into a certain realm of canon for those interested in world literature, comparative literature, post-colonial literature and just a good read. When a high school or university student can now find a wide selection of possible essay answers to a wide selection of topics on a novel it is a sign that the book has entered a sustainable cycle of reading and is well loved and appreciated, even in English translation. Teaching guides and lesson plans for teachers are now also available.

Among Indonesianists (Indonesia specialists and fellow translators), as one might expect, there are more criticisms and different evaluations. Different approaches to understanding Indonesia—from Orientalist, disguised and open, to historical materialist—and different levels, depths and character of experience with Indonesia and its language and its discourses, produce different tastes and evaluations. When I translated *This Earth of Mankind*, I was 30 years old and had ten years of experience with Indonesia. I was working as staff in the Australian Embassy. Now, 30 years later, with a new variety of engagement with the country, more familiarity with the language, a longer period to get to know Pramoedya, perhaps I would have translated differently. But then again perhaps not: perhaps there is continuity in the nature of the engagement with a society, even as time unfolds. My engagement with the beauty of Indonesia has always been in the form of friendship and collaboration with those struggling for, or who stood for, radical political change, including

Pramoedya, his editor Joesoef Isak and publisher Hasyim Rachman, as well as the poet and dramatist Rendra, but mostly those much younger. Their language, expression and communication, amongst themselves and with their society, produce a “text” of its own. In Indonesia, where modern literature is only now beginning to assert itself as a separate existential realm, the “text” of radical political interaction has determined a lot of how literary communication takes place. Political Indonesian youth who have read *This Earth of Mankind* love it, as do many who have lived through the politicising period of the rise of the opposition to Suharto. I have met many fanatical lovers of these books. For them, the mode of communication used in big sections of the novels, described below by the pioneering US anthropologist of Indonesia, Clifford Geertz (not a sympathetic reader of Pramoedya), is beautiful.

“Western critics have been generally at a loss to convey the peculiarly didactic and reiterative quality of Pramoedya’s writing in general, and of the tetralogy in particular—its relentless succession of desperately earnest conversations between typified characters in schematized scenes. So they have reached, in worried confusion, for all sorts of Western analogues: Solzhenitsyn, Steinbeck, James Baldwin, Dashiell Hammett, Dickens, Conrad, Nadine Gordimer, Camus, Dostoyevsky, and (the only one with very much to be said for it) a television miniseries. It is, in fact, a narrative, or a series of narratives, that consists almost entirely of talking heads explaining and re-explaining themselves to one another over a thirty-year period of political upheaval, almost all of which takes place offstage as summarily reported event—all of which fits oral patterns of literature and the memory devices that sustain them a good deal better than it does the plots and subplots of the realistic novel. The told tale, later transcribed, moves in a different way than a tale that has been constructed from the start as a written text. For the reader used to crises and conclusions, to peripeties of character, and to the seaward flow of cause and consequence, it may seem hardly to move at all.” (Geertz 1996)

Judging from the reactions of the scores of readers who have written to me or searched me out to talk to me and who also have expressed their views on websites like Amazon.com, there are also Western readers for whom the “desperately earnest conversations” meld into a gripping and beautiful storytelling. Apart from the resilience of the books remaining in print, it is to these readers of the English editions that I turn for the occasional counter-balance to the less happy evaluations of the expert colleagues.¹

James in *The New Yorker* feels what Geertz called “desperate earnestness” differently:

“[T]he scale of the Buru cycle...sprawls across twenty years and more than fifteen hundred pages in the English translation, by Max Lane. The first volume of the series, “This Earth of Mankind,” is one of those books that, like “The Catcher in the Rye,” inspire such devotion that an admirer instinctively mistrusts anyone who scoffs at them. As I read it, I kept regretting that I had not been able to do so at fifteen, when, with the fanaticism of adolescence, I could have appropriated Minke’s passionate idealism as my own.” (James 1996)

Although James too feels the earnestness in his own way:

“The earlier novels are the better ones: tightly written and swift-paced, they strike a careful balance between narrative and ideas. In the third and fourth volumes, there are some fairly rough patches that approach nonfiction, with characters setting forth Pramoedya’s version of Indonesian history to one another in “he said/she said” form. Hugo and Dostoyevski are the writers Pramoedya resembles at his best. Somehow the roughness is part of the greatness: it conveys a sense of abundance—of ideas, history, plot—pressing against and sometimes overflowing the capacities of literary assimilation.” (James 1996)

However, in Indonesia itself the most dynamic aspect of contemporary culture has been precisely the hundreds of thousands of desperately earnest conversations that drove the emergence of a mass protest

movement and a thousand other little but very earnest subversions that were central to the ending of a dictatorship and the *creative work* of bringing into existence the Indonesia as the work-in-progress that exists today. Desperately earnest conversations are taking place in even greater number and intensity today, and they will still comprise the textual context and the most beautiful aesthetic for the coming period. To what extent a still embryonic literary arena—represented by writers like Eka Kurniawan, Linda Christanty, Faiza Mardzoeki and others—will overlap and interact with this context and aesthetic is yet to be seen. It is in the earnestness that the most beauty is to be found, not, for now, in the nuances of “style.”

Another US academic, Benedict Anderson, wrote of Pramoedya: “Only after his death did he become accepted as his country’s grandest modern writer.” Unfortunately, this is a completely wrong conclusion. I wish it were true, but it isn’t. There has been no public announcement that his writings are no longer banned—they may very well still be formally banned. His works are not introduced, or even mentioned, in the high school curriculum for Indonesian language or literature in state schools. (Is this like US schools ignoring Steinbeck or Howard Fast?) In fact, there is no separate subject “Indonesian literature” in the state school system. The novels are barely studied at university level, depending on the youthful rebelliousness of staff and students. He has won no awards or prizes in Indonesia. Those who still wield power in the institutions of the literary establishment still minimise reference to him. Over the last ten years, in a country of 230 million, no more than 30,000 copies of any one title have been printed annually—although there is also a small thriving market in pirated copies. In fact, public recognition and publicly expressed praise for Pramoedya’s novels were much higher in the early 1980s, in the brief period before *This Earth of Mankind* was banned. Caught off guard, Indonesia’s conglomerate-owned media published excellent and positive reviews. Indonesia’s vice-president, Adam Malik, a revolutionary in his youth, invited Pramoedya and his publisher comrades, Joesoef Isak and Hasyim Rachman, to his office for a meeting. Their photograph appeared in the major daily newspapers. Malik stated publicly that the novel should be read by all students in the

schools. Today, more than 30 years later, that is still not the case. This is a direct reflection of the repression, control and hegemony of the still ruling lumpen elite and its hangers-on in the media and schools.

Of course, since the books were published more than 30 years ago, there has been a steady accumulation of devoted, even fanatical, readers. But the very limited circulation of the books means that this readership remains a tiny percentage of the population. This lack of society-wide recognition is in turn a product of the refusal of the Indonesian elite to recognise the novels properly—for example by announcing loudly the lifting of the ban (if indeed it has been lifted) and by teaching them in the schools. Understanding this reality is fundamental to contemporary Indonesian political and cultural reality. What began in the 1980s, after Pramoedya's books were published and as new small revolutionary groups were formed, was a new process of preparing the ground for the relaunching of the national revolution whose origins are the subject of Pramoedya's novels, and the social revolution for which he declares between the lines in the resolutions of the novels. The absence of full and official recognition of his works, their still marginal position, is a manifestation of the unfinished nature of this revolutionary process. The analytical task is to understand the dynamics of this process, the dynamics and aesthetics of its earnest conversations and the political and cultural outcomes it produces. One fascinating part of this, although by no means the most important, is the emergence here and there of reading groups around *This Earth of Mankind* and its sequels, including among young factory worker members of trade unions as well as students.

Another reflection of the still marginal (but subversive) status of Pramoedya's works is the almost total absence of an impact of his radical contribution to understanding Indonesian history on public and academic discussion. He depicted the formation of Indonesia's first truly mass organisation, Sarekat Islam (first as Sarekat Dagang Islam, SDI), as driven by its founder, Tirta Adhisuryo, understanding that a movement resisting the excesses of colonialism needed to be based on those earning their living separately from the colonisers. His first attempt was to organise the

civil servants in the Sarekat Priyayi, who were dependent on a Dutch salary and whose consciousness was formed partly by their identification with the colonial state and its regulations. This failed, and he turned to the free people, the burghers, the *pedagang*, those who traded or otherwise earned their living by working for it. I regularly teach classes of candidate teachers in Indonesia, and their textbooks still say that the SDI was set up purely to counter Chinese batik traders, and that another very feudal Javanese organisation, Budi Utomo, was the first modern organisation in Indonesia, not Sarekat Priyayi, as Pramoedya showed clearly was the case.

Real recognition of Pramoedya as the country's greatest writer, by the majority of society, will be won as part of the unfolding of a relaunched national and social revolution. The ground for this was partly prepared by the movement against the Suharto dictatorship and is being further prepared now by both natural sociological processes connected to labour organising as well as to radical artistic, intellectual and cultural ferment, alongside more conscious efforts to lead conditions towards such a relaunch. One of the important claims to greatness that Pramoedya's novels have, and will continue to have, is that the appreciation of them has been and is still an integral part of that preparing the ground. They will be one of the cultural weapons of these revolutions: in any case, these revolutions will also entail a cultural revolution. Pramoedya, until his dying day, was a supporter of Sukarno, who argued right up to the moment he was overthrown in 1965 that neither nation-building nor character-building for Indonesia was completed. *This Earth of Mankind* and its sequels are not only rich in their exposition of the experiences of political struggle and organising and how this is linked to class and socio-economic processes, but are also very much about *character*, that is strength of character. This orientation to issues of character is also the origin of its powerful statements, through its characters and stories, against sexism. Human beings are valued based on their character. Gender becomes irrelevant and some of Pramoedya's most inspiring characters are women whose character has been forged out of their resistance to their oppression as women.

For those seeking to be active in the unfinished process of preparing the ground, the books provide guidance on struggling for all these. Factory workers post quotes from the novels on the question of strength of character on their Facebook walls. Activists and organisers draw on the books' treasury of statements on the principles of organising. Collations of quotes from the novels abound.

Geertz (1996), as quoted above, claims that Western critics have sought comparisons with “Solzhenitsyn, Steinbeck, James Baldwin, Dashiell Hammett, Dickens, Conrad, Nadine Gordimer, Camus, and Dostoyevsky” as well as, he adds, a television mini-series. (It would be great to see a well-made Indonesian mini-series based on the novels.) For myself, I see the clearest international comparison with the great US novelist Howard Fast, particularly the historical novels of his early writing, exemplified by *Last Frontier*, *Freedom Road* and especially *Citizen Tom Paine*, but also slightly later works such as *April Morning*. Both are the great storytellers of their revolutions. Fast's novels depicted the first US revolution against British colonial rule and the second against slavery. (He also wrote eloquently on the US counter-revolution embodied in the occupation of the “West” and the extermination of the Indians, and the great novel of rebellion, *Spartacus*.) Pramoedya's historical novels depict the pre-Indonesian origins of what he called the “Indonesian national awakening”, the gestation of the Indonesian national revolution. Both were associated with the far left of their respective countries, although Fast later dissociated himself from it.

In any case, as great revolutionary storytellers, they were both harassed and suppressed, because neither the values and content nor the aesthetics of revolutionary narrative coincide with either the political or literary elite's own ideology or aesthetics. Pramoedya's historical novels are in some ways safer in terms of the West's dominant political tastes, dealing as they do with a time and place far away and a form of oppression—colonialism—which everybody now claims to oppose. Even so, Geertz's comments being just one example, not everybody relates to the aesthetics of earnestness. Some fans of Pramoedya, especially in the West, prefer

his very vivid but less didactically earnest short stories from the period before his revolutionary storytelling. Recognition for Fast has still not been properly won in the United States. While Indonesia has still not completed its national revolution, whose origins and gestation Pramoedya so brilliantly relates, and is in that sense an unfinished nation, perhaps in the United States, where the nation creation process has finished, it is not a matter of completing the national revolution, but re-winning its ideals, probably requiring an even more radical social revolution. Re-winning Fast for the US population and extending recognition and appreciation of Pramoedya's novels to the whole of Indonesian society are both connected to a necessity to relaunch revolutionary processes.

Pramoedya never published extensively, either in fiction or non-fiction, on the history of his own generation (1930s to 1965), nor on Suharto-era Indonesia, nor on the contemporary world. His greatest contribution to understanding Indonesia was his works dealing with the pre-colonial and colonial periods. However, *This Earth of Mankind* and its sequels did make a statement about the dynamic behind the historical processes that were driven forward by the vanguard of his own generation and, I think, the necessary trajectory of the process ahead for Indonesia now. The heroic protagonists of the four books were Minke, inspired by the historical figure of Tirta Adhisuryo, and Nyai Ontosoroh, the concubine taken by a Dutch colonial businessman. Nyai Ontosoroh becomes the spiritual guide for Minke in *This Earth of Mankind*. Nyai essentially educates Minke in the ideas and values of the European Enlightenment, some of which he has already inculcated, as well as Europe's black hypocrisy in how it deals with its colony. Later, in *Footsteps* and *House of Glass*, Minke—reflecting Pramoedya's assessment of the real Adhisuryo—becomes a more and more committed democrat and partisan for social justice. He is also a newspaper proprietor and entrepreneur, owning a printing press, stationery business and a hotel. Both he and Nyai are figures of the bourgeoisie: perhaps, if we applied an orthodox Marxist categorisation, they are representative of a revolutionary bourgeois democratic outlook.

A crucial point—and I don't want to act as too much of a spoiler for those who haven't yet read the novels—is that the characters fail totally in all their *immediate* efforts to resist and change. Of course, Adhisuryo and his associates and their social layer left an important legacy. But they were crushed. Indeed, until Pramoedya wrote these novels, Adhisuryo had pretty much disappeared from Indonesians' historical radar. And their fate in the novels was no less final. Towards the end of Pramoedya's depiction of this process of their failure, as he explains it throughout all four books directly and indirectly, he points to where he thinks the real energy and intellect for change will come from. New characters are introduced, more or less as cameos. They are not playing the main roles in the epic Pramoedya has written, but will do so in the epic to come. They are figures from the revolutionary working class movement that will shake up the Dutch East Indies during the decade or more that followed Adhisuryo. Of course, we know, and Indonesians know, that that generation too was crushed by colonial power and had to await colonialism's next weak moment in the aftermath of World War II.

That Pramoedya saw the future as a revival of that revolutionary working class political tradition is not only to be deduced from his introduction of these characters into the final parts of his storytelling of the origins of the Indonesian revolution. His statements after his release from prison—especially in the 1990s, when the protest movement was emerging, as well as after the fall of Suharto—again and again emphasised that the future needed a revolution that wiped away all that Suharto's New Order had created, and that the agency of change must be the youth. Furthermore, he underlined that he did not mean just any youth, but youth building an organised revolutionary left. In 1999 he took the step of being sworn in at a big public event as a member of the People's Democratic Party (PRD), which at the time represented that trajectory. It was a symbolic act, but one that emphasised his perspective.

In March in Jakarta, after speaking to a crowded-out public forum on the Indonesian poet Rendra, I was introduced to a worker from a factory

belt area outside the city. We sat on the steps chatting with a couple of other activists. He explained that he was organising a reading group among the workers in his area, based on the *This Earth of Mankind* series. You could see he did not just respect and admire the books; he loved them. To him, they were beautiful. And yes, he was a very earnest young man. Even though it is early days in the process of preparing the ground for the relaunching of the country's social and national revolution, I know that the number of this kind of reading group is growing. I am very sure that Pramoedya Ananta Toer will be recognised as Indonesia's greatest modern writer or—when others emerge to rival him in the future—the country's first great modern writer. This recognition will be won as part of either the process of preparing the ground for the relaunch of the revolutions or of the relaunch itself. And I am sure too that winning such recognition will be part of a flowering of revolutionary literature in general. It will necessarily mean an end to the situation in which the appreciation and study of literature are not taught at all in Indonesian schools, and the beginning of literary communication becoming part of the revolutionary process.

Internationally I am hopeful that *This Earth of Mankind*, its sequels and his other novels will remain in print in English. Their presence as e-books will help further expand their exposure. I am sure more people will read and love them, despite the fact that the translator is certainly not a literary figure of Pramoedya's own stature. But will there ever be a real internationalisation in which Indonesia's *This Earth of Mankind* and Indonesia's Pramoedya become household words? This I am sure will also happen. When it does, it will be primarily because Indonesia as a country, a nation, a people, will also have burst upon the world scene. And when the revolution in the fourth most populous country in the world is relaunched—and all the ingredients are steadily maturing—the revolution's intellectual and cultural output will be of interest to many.

Why am I so convinced that this will happen, and not so far into the distant future? There are many reasons, which will have to be set out elsewhere. But one thing that gives me confidence is that all the young

men and women committed to this course remain today excited and inspired by the power and beauty of Pramoedya's fictional painting of their country's origins. A very good start. And prizes? I think this will be part of winning a prize indeed: as the song says, there is a "world to win."

Meanwhile, you don't have to wait; if you haven't read *This Earth of Mankind* and its sequels, you should do so now.

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Note

- ¹ For some of the spontaneous readers' views on amazon.com, see http://www.amazon.com/This-Earth-Mankind-Buru-Quartet/product-reviews/0140256350/ref=cm_cr_dp_sec_all_summary?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=byRankDescending