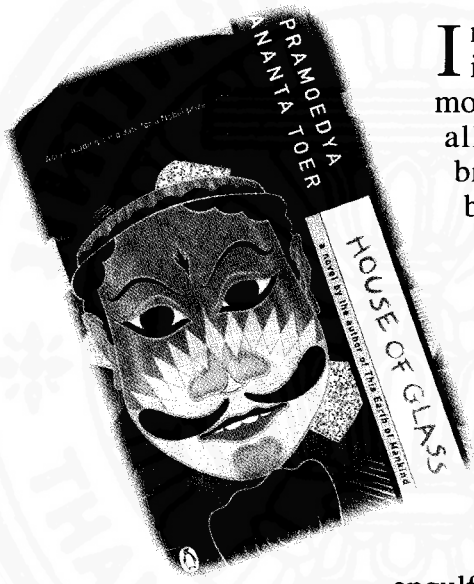
Fiction with Political Bite: Pramoedya's Message Maintains its Relevance



Indonesia has just been rocked by its second most powerful people's movement this century. Perhaps we all feel a little startled by the breathtaking and relatively non-bloody success of Java's feisty student movement. It had seemed that President Suharto's sacrosanct rule was as impenetrable as the more than 300 years of Dutch colonial domination of the diverse islands which comprise modern-day Indonesia. In light of the cataclysmic political change currently engulfing Indonesia, Penguin's release of a new edition of the final volume in Pramoedya's acclaimed 'Buru Quartet' seems most timely. Having read the first three volumes, *This Earth Mankind, Child of All Nations and Footsteps,* I was becoming frustrated by the absence on the book shelves of this final and arguably most fascinating to me in the celebrated Indonesian writer and dissident's quartet.

For those unfamiliar with the life and work of Pramoedya, he was born on Java in 1925 and was imprisoned by the Dutch from 1947 to 1949 for his involvement in the independence revolution. He was again jailed in the late 1960s, ironically this time by his own

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House of Glass.
By Pramoedya Ananta Toer (translated and introduced by Max Lane). USA: Penguin Books; 1992 (First English language translation), 1997 (reprint). 365 pp., US$12.95 paperback (ISBN0-14-02.5679-2).

Indonesian government as a political prisoner. Many of his 30 works of fiction and non-fiction were completed while he languished in prison. Of these works, undoubtedly the Buru Quartet is his most amazing achievement for it was composed 'in his head' as stories to entertain fellow prisoners during their incarceration under primitive conditions on Buru Island from 1969 to 1979. Pramoedya was only given access to writing materials in the last few years of his decade-long imprisonment on Buru Island, so the final written narration of this four volume tale about native leader Minke was drawn from his memory of the stories he shared with fellow inmates and from recollections of historical research he had carried out in the early 1960s. It is quite an achievement to capture the historic detail and complexity of an early 20th Century Netherlands Indies from one's own memory. Despite the Buru Quartet being set in pre-independence times, Pramoedya's work was not welcomed under Suharto's regime - his books are banned in his own country and he is currently under city arrest in Jakarta. It is hoped that Indonesia's second awakening may see this internationally acclaimed author finally reclaim his rightful voice in Indonesian literature and politics.

The first three volumes of the Buru Quartet trace the life of native leader Minke, from self-focused teenager to a man of political maturity and integrity. Minke's character is inspired by the life of one of the key figures in Indonesia's nationalist movement and founder of modern Indonesian journalism, Tirto Adi Suryo. Minke's personal heritage is that of a middle-ranking member of the Javanese aristocracy and he is endowed with the highest title in this class - *a Raden Mas*. Minke, however, does not succumb to the temptations of his privileged background. Instead he harnesses his European-style education to fight for the rights of all native people. His visionary grasp of how the disparate peoples of the Dutch Indies could be transformed if they united against the forces of colonialism is inspired and set against the backdrop of monumental social change gripping Europe and America as a result of the industrial revolution. The popular rebellion being played out in neighbouring Asian countries also feeds Minke's desire for the freedom of his own peoples. The impact of these turbulent changes on the native consciousness is reflected in Minke's character as he evolves as a new type of social being - an Indonesian bourgeoisie motivated by the French revolutionary slogan "Liberty, fraternity, equality". Through the skills of entrepreneurialism, journalism and publishing Minke struggles to create a social movement which embraces the 'best' of bourgeois values - quality education, sophisticated mechanisation and transport, democratic government and institutions. His battle against the crushing stranglehold of colonialism necessarily aligns him with the impoverished masses of the common people. As translator Max Lane says in his introduction to the *House of Glass*, "The bourgeois dedicated to the people is a rare but persisting phenomenon in Asian society

even today" (1997, p. xi). Indeed this dynamic was most recently played out in the corridors and surrounds of Jakarta's parliamentary complex by students and middle- class bourgeois united in their struggle to topple a stubborn dictator.

House of Glass, the final volume in Pramoedya's tetralogy, is perhaps the most riveting because the reader is jolted out of Minke's intense personal account of the historic events leading to a contemporary independence movement in Indonesia, and is instead invited to look through the eyes of a native policeman assigned to monitor Minke and the emerging nationalist movement. Having been previously seduced to champion the heroic and committed journey undertaken by Minke to free the minds and souls of his fellow citizens from the life-sapping force of Dutch colonial rule, Pramoedya unexpectedly throws the reader into the intimate world of the enemy - a native collaborator with colonialism. This is an unsettling experience, for Inspector Pangemanann is an individual, a human being who is as confused about his role as an oppressor as we are. We witness Pangemanann's tortuous descent into the corrupt underworld of political manipulation, where he is forced to forego his own moral convictions in order to preserve his hard won position as a high ranking native policeman within a colonial institution of power. Pangemanann is not a nameless, faceless, inhumane perpetrator of evil deeds. He is by all accounts a poignant reflection of the confused ambivalence of the human condition:

> "I knew that I would not be able to resist, that I would cross further into the field of mud before me, as a good official, as a successful career man. You can't succeed in everything, I humoured myself... Anyway what was the real difference between a successful human being and a successful criminal? They both combined elements of success. The only difference was that one was good at being a human being, the other at being a criminal" (pp. 85-86).

The polite and apologetic manner in which Pangemanann carries out his covert and systematic destruction of both Minke the individual and his political movement also provides a valuable insight into the Javanese psyche of non-confrontation and passivity in the face of conflict, where to cause *malu* or embarrassment is the height of uncouth or ignorant behaviour. This unwillingness to overtly express discontent and frustration may, in part, explain why the two greatest social movements in Indonesia's history have only been ignited in the 'last hour', when desperation moves citizens beyond the realms of courtesy.

People endeavouring to garner an understanding of the complex psychological machinery behind political oppression and human rights abuses would learn much from reading *House of Glass*. This tale of betrayal

against one's own people is as relevant in today's world as it was in Minke and Pangemanann's early 20th Century world. Inspector Pangemanann embodies the bitter hypocrisy of regimes throughout the world which continue to oppress, imprison and torture their own people. Burma springs to mind, as does China, North Korea, Turkey, Algeria, the Sudan and unfortunately too many more to name. It is this ongoing relevancy that is the real power behind Pramoedya's work (and no doubt why the Indonesian government has viewed his stories as politically destabilising) because the characters within the Buru Quartet are really the protagonists of humankind's turbulent and unrelenting cycle of history, in its many and varied forms - Minke the revolutionary, Pangemanann the ethically corrupt traitor to his own people. As translator Max Lane says, "These are not novels set against the background of historical events, in which the uninformed can become informed about those events while enjoying a good story... History is not the background to these stories, it is the protagonist" (1997, p. xi-xii).

Those interested in the dynamics of revolution and political and social change will benefit immensely from reading all four volumes of the Buru Quartet, but *House of Glass* is a novel which can be read independently of its fellow volumes. While the first three novels are tightly linked through Minke's voice as the central protagonist and probably need to be consumed in sequence, the final volume is quite readable as a stand alone work of fiction. The dramatic events captured so vividly through Minke and Pangemanann's eyes tell us much about the forces of political and social evolution within a nation. Many of us could no doubt see the curtain falling on Suharto's shadow play. The surprise is that Suharto himself failed to learn from a timeworn historical dynamic - that when the people can no longer afford to eat, they will no longer be the willing *wayang* of the puppet master. Perhaps if Bapak Suharto had read Pramoedya's Buru Quartet, instead of banning it, he may have fully grasped the powerful message of history's insatiable appetite for change.