

Recent Writers in Indonesia

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Background

Since the appearance of modern literature in Indonesia in 1920, there has been a steady flow of writing through times of war, rebellion, political and economic crises, power struggles, and so on, all of which provided impetus to the work. There were novels about society and people in the Dutch colonial era, short stories, drama on the problem of Japanese power in Indonesia, novels about the era of the Indonesian revolution and liberal democracy era, and the communist rebellion in 1965, and also criticism in literature of the New Order under the Suharto regime. The works of Indonesian modern literature always deal with its cultural environment. This is understandable, because most Indonesian writers come from the educated middle class, who have always been victims of the mismanagement of power.

The most commonly used forms of writing are the short stories and poetry, because they are easy to publish in weekly or monthly magazines. Since the 1970s these types of writing have also been published in the newspapers. In book form, a work of literature is quite difficult to find. A novel writer whose work is in the newspaper continuously, sometimes has to wait for five or ten years before the work is published in book form. This kind of serious literature does not sell well, unless it becomes controversial.

The publication of serious literature depends on the big publishers, which do not seek only profit. A publisher in the colonial era, *Balai Pustaka*, was famous for publishing this kind of books. It could be done because the colonial government subsidized it in order to control what people should actually read. After independence, *Balai Pustaka* was taken over by the Indonesian government, and still publishes literature frequently.

Another publisher which has also published serious literature since independence, is *Pustaka Jaya*. This is a private institution managed by Ajip Rosidi, a writer. Other publishers not as productive as those mentioned above, include *Djambatan*, *Gunung Agung*, *Pembangunan*, and recently *Gramedia*, *Obor*, and *Granesia*.

Poets, mostly the young ones, prefer to publish their own compilations of poetry. Indonesian literature in book form

consisting of novels and compilations of short stories, supposedly amounts to about 2,500 works, including translated literature from other countries.

Current Literature

The last political era in Indonesia was the 'New Order under the Power of Suharto' regime (1966-1998). Until the 1990s, Indonesian literature had developed well, because of the aid of the Jakarta Arts Council which held control of an art centre called *Taman Ismail Marzuki*. In 1968, this council was fully supported by the governor of *DKI* (specific region) Jakarta, Ali Sadikin, who had a liberal vision. This art council organized several activities, one of them being a novel and drama script-writing competition, the results of which were surprising. Many works with a new vision appeared, such as that written by Putu Wijaya, (a novelist and playwright), Danarto (a short-story writer), Budi Darma (a short-story writer and novelist), Sutardji Calzoum Bachri (a poet), Abdul Hadi WM (a poet), Iwan Simatupang (a novelist), and Arifin C. Noer (a playwright). Now, their works have become classics of modern literature.

But during the late 1980s, the Indonesian government started to repress certain literature, especially, that which was about 'the Power'. A number of poetry readings and dramas were banned. Also, the great novels of Pramoedya Ananta Toer were prohibited and could not be circulated. This situation ended with the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998. The following period, called the Reformation Era, brought a kind of euphoria of freedom, such as had happened in 1966 and 1945. In this situation, without any prohibition, were born several significant works of literature.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer

No writer like Pramoedya Ananta Toer had caused so much discussion in Indonesia since 1980. This writer, born in 1925, published his first novel, *Kranji-Bekasi Jatuh*, in 1947. Since 1957, he has written 9 novels and 3 collections of short stories. In 1980, after being released from the prison in Buru Island by the government of the New Order, he caused up-



Pramoedya Ananta Toer and his recent play *Mangir*
(Photos courtesy of Mr. A. Taryadi)



Pramoedya Ananta Toer delivering a public lecture in Tokyo, Japan in 2000
(photo courtesy of Japan Foundation Asia Center)

roar amongst the Indonesian people with a quartet of novels called *Bumi Manusia (The Earth of Mankind)*, *Anak Semua Bangsa (Child of All Nations)*, *Jejak Langkah (Footsteps)*, and *Rumah Kaca (House of Glass)*. Those novels were based on the biography of a reporter who was very actively involved in the national movement, called R. M. Tirtoadisuryo (Minke). This figure had never been mentioned as a pioneer of the national movement of educated people in Indonesia. Pramoedya made him appear as such, with due dedication. The government of the New Order prohibited these novels. In spite of that, this writer still continued to publish other works underground, such as *Arus Balik (Reverse Stream)* in 1995. The latter is an historical novel which tells about the fall of the independence and the golden age of Java that used to depend on the sea, shipping and international trade, then tended to become an agricultural state governed by authority and a conventional system.

Another novel, *Gadis Pantai (The Girl from the Coast)*, is a reprint of his work from 1962. In 1999 he published a novel called *Arok-Dedes* based on the mytho-history of Java. It can be seen that he was drawn towards several figures in the history of Indonesia who came from the common people, and had successfully changed the history of their nation.

His old novel, *Larasati* (1960), was republished in 2000 along with *Gadis Pantai*. His most recent work is a play called *Mangir*, also based on the rebellion of a leader of the common people who had a liberal attitude, against the authority of the king of Mataram.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer is considered as the oldest author still writing who holds a consistent view of 'people power'. He is also the most productive writer with the greatest amount of work in Indonesia, and has won a great deal of merit for the quality of his work, given by a number of observers in literature. (see p. 11)

Seno Gumira Ajidarma

This writer, born in 1958, is considered a very productive writer of short stories. At first, he wrote mostly poetry, and later on he moved to short stories. Recently, he tried to write a novel, which is now being serialized in one of the Jakarta newspapers. This first book of short stories was *Manusia Kamar* (1988), followed by *Penembak Misterius* (1993), and another 6 collections of short stories. His most recent work is *Matinya Seorang Penari Telanjang* (2000). In general, his short stories are characterized as surrealistic, based on actual events in the society that caused an uproar (the fight against *preman* 'someone who enslaves another people,' and the cruelty in East Timor). Seno Gumira Ajidarma skillfully manipulates mundane life into his pure imagination. His work shows how life is sometimes similar to the imagination, how life is possible without imagination, how a man can live fully in his imagination, and how he takes advantage of imagination in his real life.

The Newcomers

In 1998, literary circles in Indonesia were surprised by the publication of a novel written by a young woman called Ayu Utami. Her novel, *Saman*, was one of the contenders in a novel-writing competition held by Jakarta Arts Council. With-



Saman by Ayu Utami



Dewi Lestari

in one year, this novel has been reprinted ten times. The style of writing is so direct, smart, and about the life of young people who have a global vision, and are brave enough to formulate a new morality for youth. It has brought a fresh and new approach to novel writing in Indonesia. Although this novel is the first part of an intended series, people are still waiting for the follow-up.

Another newcomer is a young woman as well, called "Dee," or Dewi Lestari (born in 1976). In 2001 she published her first novel called *Supernova*. (see p. 15) This novel has been reprinted 5 times in only 6 months. The work of Dewi Lestari (she is also a singer) brings a vision of a new spirituality based on several inventions of modern science in the 20th century. It has popular story lines, which could be found easily in television serials, that is, love affairs, the broken love among celebrities in Jakarta. Within the framework of a popular story, the author would like to show the truth about her vision of a new spirituality in the theory of chaos, turbulence, probability, holism, and so on. Dewi has also promised to follow her first novel with others about the new spirituality.

Fruits of Literature Magazines

Indonesian literature since independence (1945) has developed through magazines of culture and literature. In those magazines one could find short stories, poetry, drama, and literary criticism. The only literature magazine that still has a good circulation is *Horison*. This magazine was started in 1966, by a writer called Mochtar Lubis and through it a lot of change has come about in the art of writing by new writers. A writer of mystico-surrealistic short stories, Danarto, started his career through this magazine, and, many young writers still feature their works. Young poets who appeared later on can be noted, such as Afizal Malna, Soni Farid Maulana, Agus. R. Sarjono, Acep Zamzam Noor, Agus Noor, and Gus tf. This magazine also put an insertion about literature education in schools, to help teachers in teaching the literature of their nation.

(translated by F. X. Widaryanto)

reference:

Titles by Pramoedya Ananta Toer:

Kranji-Bekasi, jatuh (Kranji-Bekasi is a region near Jakarta, famous in the history of the struggle against the Dutch), *Arok-Dedes* (Ken Arok and his wife Ken Dedes, who are legendary figures), *Larasati* (name of a woman), *Mangir* (name of a village, whose leader is called Ki Ageng Mangir)

Titles by Seno Gumira Ajidarma:

Manusia Kamar (man who loves staying indoors and dislikes outdoor life), *Penembak Misterius* (mysterious shooters), *Matinya Seorang Penari Telanjang* (the death of a stark-naked dancer)

Jakob Sumardjo

Born in 1939. Graduating from IKIP Bandung in 1970, he is a historian and currently lecturer in Akademi Seni Tari Indonesia (The Indonesian Dance Institute), Bandung. He has written and edited more than 16 books, most of them about Indonesian literature. The most recent of his works is *Konteks Sosial Novel Indonesia (The Social Context of Indonesian Novels) 1920-1977* in 1999.

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