

Ananta Toer in Malaysia: Humanist Ideology, Reception History, and His Position in the Nusantara Literary Discourse

Awang Azman Awang Pawi¹, Nurhanis Sahiddan², Nik Rafidah Muhamad Nik Affendi Pi³

^{1,2}Academy of Malay Studies, University of Malaya

³Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, University of Putra Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This paper Pramoedya Ananta Toer, a major literary figure in Indonesia, has made significant contributions to the Malay literary world through works that champion social justice, nationalism, and historical consciousness. In Malaysia, his works have found a place in educational and academic domains despite being banned or rejected in his home country during the New Order regime. This study traces the reception history of Pramoedya's works in Malaysia, identifies the ideological factors shaping this acceptance, and analyses how he has been appreciated by Malaysian scholars. Using a qualitative approach combining in-depth interviews, textual analysis, and documentary research, this article argues that Pramoedya's contributions are valued not merely through the lens of political controversy, but from perspectives of humanism, postcolonial values, and regional literary solidarity within the Malay world.

KEYWORDS

Pramoedya Ananta Toer, humanism, postcolonialism, literary politics, Nusantara author, Malaysia.



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Introduction

In Southeast Asia's postcolonial literary discourse, the name Pramoedya Ananta Toer—often referred to simply as “Pram”—holds a distinctive place. His works are frequently read as social documents chronicling colonial oppression and the ideological turbulence of 20th-century Indonesia. However, the reception of Pramoedya's works in Malaysia—as formal literary texts in education and objects of academic research—has received insufficient attention, especially in light of regional politics and literary solidarity in the Malay world.

This paper explores the ways in which Pramoedya has been accepted in Malaysia's educational and academic contexts, why his work has been more appreciated abroad than in his own country, and how the ideology of humanism embedded in his writings is translated into Malaysian literary discourse. The study also foregrounds Malaysian

scholarly views of Pramoedya, examining not only his political controversy but also the aesthetic and universal human values conveyed through his writing.

Methodology and Theoretical Approach

This paper employs critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) and postcolonial theory as articulated by Edward Said (1993) and Homi Bhabha (1994), particularly concepts such as the “voice of the subaltern” and ideological ambivalence. Key data sources include curriculum documents, publication histories, and interviews with Malaysian literary scholars such as Mokhtar Hassan, Saleeh Rahamad, Muhammad Haji Salleh, and Kamaruddin Said. These are supplemented with textual analysis and reception studies.

Background: Pramoedya and the Oppression of Power

Born on February 6, 1925, in Blora, Central Java, Indonesia, Pramoedya grew up in a nationalist family; his father was a teacher and Budi Utomo activist who instilled in him a spirit of resistance against colonialism (Toer, 1999). As a young man, he witnessed Japanese occupation, the Dutch return, and eventually Indonesia’s independence in 1945.

His early works—*Perburuan* (1950) and *Keluarga Gerilya* (1958)—were written after his imprisonment by Dutch authorities [3]. Pramoedya was deeply involved in left-wing cultural movements like Lekra, which led to his detention after the 1965 coup and eventual imprisonment without trial on Buru Island for 14 years. There, he composed his masterpiece, the Buru Tetralogy, orally at first, later transcribed and published [5].

Reception of Pramoedya’s Work in Malaysia

While Indonesia banned *Bumi Manusia*, *Anak Semua Bangsa*, *Jejak Langkah*, and *Rumah Kaca* during Suharto’s rule, Malaysia introduced Pramoedya’s work gradually in the 1970s and 1980s. Notably, *Keluarga Gerilya* was selected as a required text in the STPM Malay Literature syllabus (Interview with Mokhtar Hassan, 2025). This selection signified Malaysia’s openness to regional literature, even when it carried ideological associations with the left.

Informal translations and intellectual exchange further facilitated the reception of Pramoedya in Malaysian academia. Publishers such as Pustaka Antara played a key role in disseminating his works to schools and universities (Mokhtar Hassan, personal communication, 2025).

According to Kamaruddin Said, the adoption of *Keluarga Gerilya* was based on its narrative depth and emotional resonance, capable of engaging students intellectually. Ironically, while Indonesia suppressed Pramoedya, Malaysia recognized his literary worth—a culturally symbolic act following the Konfrontasi period (1963-1966).

Malaysian Scholarly Perspectives: Aesthetic Appreciation and Humanist Ideology

Mokhtar Hassan: Pedagogy and Aesthetic Literacy

Professor Emeritus Mokhtar Hassan emphasizes that Pramoedya's reception in Malaysia stemmed from intellectual rather than ideological motivations. His inclusion in the curriculum was aimed at developing historical consciousness, character psychology, and aesthetic appreciation.

"Pram's strength lies in his ability to narrate the suffering of common people left out of official histories," said Mokhtar (2025). He views characters like Saaman and Amilah in *Keluarga Gerilya* as symbols of moral and national trauma. Saaman, who kills his stepfather for collaborating with colonial forces, represents the moral complexity of resistance. Amilah, driven insane by the loss of her sons to war, metaphorically embodies the wounded motherland.

Mokhtar highlights how Pramoedya's narrative structure—compressing the action into three days and nights using stream-of-consciousness techniques—was emotionally and technically sophisticated, reshaping the literary sensibilities of Malaysian students and writers alike. Authors like A. Samad Said and Arena Wati were notably influenced by Pram's introspective and humanistic approach.

Saleeh Rahamad: Pram as Subaltern Writer and Radical Nationalist

Dr. Saleeh Rahamad positions Pramoedya as a subaltern writer who voiced the silenced and marginalized. For Saleeh, Pramoedya's literature was not mere storytelling, but a form of intellectual resistance. His *Buru Tetralogy* reclaims history from below—narrated through the eyes of natives, women, and the working class.

In *The Girl from the Coast*, Pramoedya critiques patriarchy and colonial feudalism by giving voice to a powerless woman, demonstrating what Saleeh terms "double voicing"—the amplification of silenced identities. Even in prison, Pramoedya continued writing, embodying resistance not just in theme, but in practice. Saleeh concludes: *"Pram did not write for commerce; he wrote for consciousness."*

Johan Jaaffar: Recognition and Ideological Irony

Veteran journalist and literary figure Datuk Johan Jaaffar adds a personal and critical dimension. He notes the historical irony that Malaysia embraced Pramoedya while Indonesia condemned him: *"Malaysians hated the ideology but appreciated a good work of literature when they saw one."*

Although Pram never received royalties from Malaysian readers, his influence on students was profound. According to Johan, Pramoedya stands as a symbol of literary

courage and intellectual defiance—qualities often punished in authoritarian states, but celebrated elsewhere.

However, Johan does not deny the darker side of Pramoedya, particularly his involvement in Lekra (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat), which he likens to the ideological extremism of McCarthyism in the United States. Lekra reportedly monitored and labelled other writers who did not align with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), causing many writers to lose their creative freedom.

In his writings, Johan states that *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu (The Mute's Soliloquy)* stands as one of the most powerful memoirs in Asian literary history. Despite the stigma of being a former political prisoner, Pram steadfastly defended his right to write and to speak the truth.

In *Keluarga Gerilya*, Johan cites a line from the protagonist Saaman:

“If you are honest, you do not fear death. Only then are you brave enough to die for what you believe in.”

According to Johan, this quote encapsulates Pram's spirit as a writer—honesty as the principal value in literature and struggle. Although many Indonesian writers criticised him as a PKI ideologue, he nonetheless remained a leading candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature and a global icon of freedom of expression.

Halim Ali's Perspective

In the article “*Journalistic Hegemony in the Analysis of the Buru Tetralogy by Pramoedya Ananta Toer*,” authors Halim Ali and Azman Ismail [2] examine the intersection of journalism and power discourse in Pramoedya's major works, especially the Buru Tetralogy: *This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps*, and *House of Glass*. Through the lens of critical discourse analysis, the study significantly contributes to postcolonial literary scholarship by demonstrating how Pramoedya used journalism as an ideological tool to resist colonial hegemony and advocate nationalist consciousness and human rights.

A central argument is that journalism in the Tetralogy does not merely serve as narrative background but functions as a political and hegemonic discourse. The protagonist, Minke, a young journalist symbolising native nationalism, is employed by Pramoedya as a vehicle to assert the importance of knowledge, writing, and freedom of speech. The study argues that journalism in the Tetralogy challenges colonial narratives by offering an alternative identity that fights for social justice and amplifies the voices of the oppressed—women, indigenous peoples, and the poor.

Halim argues that Pramoedya does not approach journalism from a neutral standpoint but wields it as an ideological strategy to critique and undermine the power structures

of Dutch colonialism. Minke is portrayed as a subject of hegemony who internalises yet simultaneously deconstructs colonial discourse through the printed press. Here, Pramoedya's Gramscian influence becomes evident—hegemony is established not through brute force but through cultural and discursive dominance.

Moreover, Pramoedya deliberately positions the press as a vehicle for public education, aligning it with the nationalist ideals of the early 20th century. In *Footsteps*, for example, Minke campaigns for the establishment of native schools and independent newspapers as tools of intellectual enlightenment. According to the analysis, Pramoedya's effort to unify national identity through education and journalism reflects his belief in the centrality of historical consciousness in popular resistance. The press thus emerges not merely as a source of information, but as a battleground for ideological contestation between colonial power and the rising spirit of nationalism.

In this light, Pramoedya is not merely an author, but a public intellectual who employs literature as a space for political discourse. This is supported by his narrative strategies—internal monologue, retrospective narration, and journalistic styles such as editorial writing and historical documentation—demonstrating a convergence between literary craft and journalistic advocacy for free expression.

Halim also addresses the tension between colonial and indigenous discourses, particularly through the use of language. Dutch, within the Tetralogy, symbolises colonial dominance, while Malay (later Indonesian) represents liberation and national consciousness. Minke's gradual detachment from the colonial language reflects Pramoedya's fight for the recognition of local voices and language as tools of emancipation.

This analysis concludes that the *Buru Tetralogy* is a multifaceted literary project intertwining history, ideology, and power. It confirms that Pramoedya Ananta Toer was not only recounting the story of a nation's struggle but also actively producing counter-discourses through journalistic techniques to alter public consciousness. The hegemony he sought to dismantle was not merely political or economic but cultural—determining who has the right to speak, to write, and to be remembered in history.

Ultimately, Halim asserts that Pramoedya's use of the Tetralogy as a literary battlefield against oppression also functioned as a tool for constructing a progressive, people-centric Indonesian national identity. The journalism in these works does not merely resist colonialism but opens intellectual space for future generations to understand the importance of media, writing, and history in shaping a nation's destiny. Thus, Pramoedya's *Buru Tetralogy* represents a radical, intellectual, and emancipatory form of literary journalism.

Perspective of Noordin Mohd Noor

The article "*Literature Literacy as a Medium of Peace and Harmony between Two Countries*" by Noordin Mohd Noor [7] highlights the significant role of Indonesian literary works—particularly those of Pramoedya Ananta Toer—in shaping intellectual awareness and humanistic values among Malaysian students. Through the lens of educational and regional literary thought, Noordin offers an analysis that underscores the importance of Pramoedya's works as a medium for developing historical consciousness, nationalism, and humanity.

Firstly, Noordin emphasizes that Indonesian literature has played a vital role in Malaysian education since the 1970s, including Pramoedya's novel *Keluarga Gerilya*. According to him, these works were not included in school syllabi merely due to shared cultural heritage, but because of their intellectual depth and thematic relevance, which aligned with Malaysia's national education philosophy. Pramoedya's works are portrayed as rich in universal values such as resistance, social justice, and the awareness of independence—key elements in forming a balanced individual as envisioned by Malaysia's national educational goals.

In this context, Pramoedya is praised as a writer who frames the struggle for independence not merely as a historical narrative but as a profoundly human story that evokes emotion and idealism. In *Keluarga Gerilya*, Noordin illustrates how Pramoedya portrays the suffering of ordinary people through the character of Saaman and his family, who endure trauma and sacrifice in their pursuit of independence. Characters like Amilah and Salamah represent the psychological and social burdens borne by common people, making the novel emotionally resonant and effective in raising students' awareness of postcolonial realities.

Noordin also discusses how Malaysian students who read Pramoedya's works gain direct exposure to the realities of colonization, suffering, and the values of resistance through layered narratives. This provides them with a critical understanding of history that is often not accessible through standard history textbooks. According to Noordin, *Keluarga Gerilya* introduces students to high-level literary techniques such as inner monologue, psychological character analysis, and complex narrative structures, transforming literature study into an intellectually engaging experience.

Additionally, Noordin highlights how Indonesian literature contributes to the formation of Malaysian students' identities. Pramoedya, as an icon of Indonesian literature, is seen not just as an author but as a moral and intellectual educator who successfully imparts humanistic and social awareness. In the Malaysian context, his works serve as catalysts for students to evaluate values of freedom, sacrifice, and the meaning of independence from the perspective of the oppressed.

Interestingly, Noordin also raises the issue of cultural solidarity between Malaysia and Indonesia through literature. He states that despite political boundaries, literature serves as a cultural bridge that brings both nations closer. The inclusion of Pramoedya's works in Malaysian schools during the New Order era in Indonesia, when they were banned, reflects Malaysia's openness in appreciating universal literary values and rejecting ideological censorship.

One of the key contributions of this study is its exposure of how Pramoedya's works function as educational tools, not merely as entertainment. This includes students' ability to understand the value of resistance by comparing characters' experiences with their own social realities. In the long term, these students grow into individuals who are more attuned to literature as a reflection of society and a medium for social critique.

Finally, Noordin advocates for continued study and teaching of literature from Indonesia and other regional countries in higher education as an effort to strengthen cultural ties and shared identity in the region. This is important to ensure that literature does not remain trapped within political boundaries but continues to function as a dialogic space that unites the Nusantara community.

Overall, Noordin Mohd Noor's [7] perspective elevates Pramoedya Ananta Toer not only as a major Indonesian literary figure but as a regional intellectual symbol who advocates for independence, justice, and humanity through literature. His influence in Malaysia's educational system proves that high-quality literature will endure and remain impactful, even when rejected by prevailing political ideologies in its country of origin.

Perspective of Novel Lyndon

The study by Novel Lyndon et al. explores the *"Imagination of Indonesian Colonization Through Documentary Film"*. It examines how the documentary titled *"Pramoedya Ananta Toer by Arngrim Ytterhus"* shapes perceptions of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia through visual and narrative storytelling based on Pramoedya Ananta Toer's life and struggles. This research not only explores the film's content but also evaluates viewer responses (Indonesian university students in Malaysia) to its messages. It offers insights into how Pramoedya's thoughts and works are interpreted and disseminated within the space of visual narrative media.

Content-wise, the documentary presents Pramoedya as a bold writer who challenged colonial power through his pen and intellectual voice. It shows how his works—especially those about colonialism—were banned, burned, and censored by the Dutch authorities who saw them as threats to their hegemony. The film successfully portrays Pramoedya's intellectual strength as a form of resistance to colonialism, aligning with his reputation as a writer deeply committed to historical awareness, justice, and freedom.

However, the study also highlights the tension between the documentary's intent and how young Indonesian viewers interpret its message. The university student viewers demonstrate critical capabilities in assessing symbolic and connotative visual narratives. For instance, some informants question the exaggerated depiction of Dutch women's beauty and the superiority of colonial education systems, viewing these as forms of historical manipulation and propaganda.

From an intellectual standpoint, Pramoedya is referred to by one respondent as an "intellectual atom bomb," signaling recognition of his literary power and ideological impact in fostering national consciousness and historical awareness. In the documentary, Pramoedya is not merely a witness to history but a creator of counter-narratives to colonial versions of the past. This aligns with his role as a postcolonial author challenging the hegemonic historiography of colonizers.

The study also discusses how visual elements in the film serve to construct the "imagination of colonization"—a form of collective memory shaped through images, archival photos, and historical symbols. Despite attempts to frame Dutch colonizers in a positive light, young audiences are still able to reject such representations based on their understanding of real history and inherited nationalist values. This demonstrates that even when represented visually, Pramoedya's ideas cannot be obscured by colonial narratives, as his thoughts are already deeply rooted in the discourse of independence and Indonesian nationalism.

The strength of this study lies in its application of visual literacy theory (Potter, 2004; Harris, 2006) and semiotics (Halliday, 1985) to understand how audiences perceive the documentary. It underscores that visual images do not always carry a singular or neutral message. Attempts to portray Dutch colonizers as "benevolent" were rejected by informants due to their historical memory and nationalist convictions.

Moreover, the study reveals that even though the film takes the form of a documentary and presents historical narratives, it is laden with propaganda elements. In this context, Pramoedya's own anti-hegemonic and anti-colonial stance becomes the core of resistance to attempts to whitewash history. The ideological influence of humanism and nationalism in Pramoedya's work empowers viewers to reject subtle colonialist narratives embedded within the film.

Ultimately, the study concludes that despite the documentary's attempt to create a positive perception of Dutch colonialism, the strength of Pramoedya's ideas and the historical awareness of the Indonesian public—especially the youth—render this attempt ineffective. This reinforces Pramoedya's status as a prominent postcolonial writer in the anti-colonial discourse and the formation of national identity through literature. Thus, the article evaluates Pramoedya's work not only as textual literature but also

examines the implications of historical visualization on public thought regarding colonialism, ideology, and the values of independence.

Analysis of Pramoedya Ananta Toer as a Humanist Writer

Pramoedya Ananta Toer is one of Indonesia's most prominent literary figures, widely known not only for his technical mastery and sharp narrative style, but more importantly for the ideological clarity of his defense of human dignity. Although often linked with leftist ideology and the Socialist Realist movement—particularly due to his association with the Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (Lekra)—Pramoedya consistently maintained that he was not a communist, but a humanist. His humanist ideology, rooted in the belief in human value, dignity, and freedom, forms the core of nearly all his major works. This commitment is manifested through historical narratives, character constructions, and narrative structures that foreground human struggles against oppression, injustice, and the tyranny of sociopolitical systems.

Humanism as Resistance to Colonialism

In *Keluarga Gerilya*, Pramoedya portrays a lower-class family devastated by their resistance against Dutch colonialism. Saaman, Canimin, and Kartiman fight bravely, while their mother Amilah suffers psychological collapse from the trauma of losing all her children. These characters are not depicted merely as political actors but as ordinary human beings facing moral dilemmas, emotional suffering, and identity crises. This is the essence of Pramoedya's humanism—he centers narratives around individual suffering, rather than using them as tools of political propaganda.

Rather than glorifying nationalism through rhetorical fervor, Pram insists that true independence must be understood through the lens of human sacrifice. His critique of colonialism lies not solely in its foreign control, but in its violation of the human right to self-determination.

Voice of the Subaltern: Humanism as Emancipatory Action

Pramoedya's work consistently gives voice to subaltern figures—oppressed classes, women, students, and the urban poor—positioning them as historical agents. In the *Buru Tetralogy* (*This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps*, *House of Glass*), the protagonist Minke is a native Indonesian youth confronting colonialism, feudalism, and racial discrimination. Pram constructs Minke not as a heroic ideologue but as a human in search of meaning through education, love, and authorship.

Female characters such as Annelies and Nyai Ontosoroh in *This Earth of Mankind* exemplify dignity and resistance in a patriarchal colonial society. Here, Pram articulates a “double humanism”—one that advocates for human rights both as

colonized subjects and as silenced women within traditional and colonial structures. This “double voice” is part of the deeply embedded humanism in his works.

Beyond Ideology: Humanism Against Dogma

Despite his previous proximity to Lekra, Pramoedya openly rejected dogmatism. In *The Mute’s Soliloquy*, he insisted that writing must serve human truth, not party interests or political power. He did not write for the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), but for the voiceless public. Hence, although he was imprisoned by Suharto’s New Order regime and accused of communism, he remained an independent voice who rejected all forms of totalitarianism—whether colonial, militaristic, or ideological.

Pramoedya’s humanism is therefore not the abstract Enlightenment humanism of the West but a grounded, engaged humanism (committed humanism), rooted in lived experience and directed toward emancipation.

Humanism as a Postcolonial Strategy

Within the postcolonial theoretical framework (Said, 1993; Spivak, 1988), Pramoedya’s work functions as a counter-discourse to both colonial and nationalist hegemonies. By centering individual stories (personal histories), he challenges hegemonic representations that depersonalize and marginalize the colonized. While official Indonesian historiography often glorifies nationalist elites and marginalizes ordinary people, Pram restores agency to common individuals.

Thus, Pramoedya’s humanism becomes a political strategy—not in pursuit of power, but to build historical and cultural consciousness grounded in the experiences of the marginalized. His writings remind readers that colonialism is not only a political crisis, but a humanitarian one.

Reception in Malaysia: Humanism Beyond Ideological Labels

In the context of literary politics, Pramoedya’s works operate as postcolonial texts that subvert power structures—whether colonial, nationalist, or militaristic. However, in Malaysia, despite prevailing sensitivities toward communism and leftist ideologies (especially after the Communist insurgency of 1948-1989), his literature was not viewed as an ideological threat.

Malaysia’s acceptance of Pramoedya’s work—particularly *Keluarga Gerilya* as an official high school text in the 1980s—demonstrates a mature literary culture capable of appreciating artistic merit and cultural affinity over political labeling. In Malaysia, Pramoedya was not seen merely as a controversial Indonesian figure, but as a regional literary icon within the shared Malay world.

Humanism as Intellectual Legacy

Humanism in Pramoedya's writing is not just a moral stance but a coherent, subversive, and courageous literary philosophy. In a Southeast Asian context still marked by authoritarian legacies and ideological paranoia, Pram's voice reminds us that real freedom begins by recognizing the intrinsic dignity of all humans—beyond nation, party, or religion.

For Pramoedya, literature is not merely for storytelling, but a platform to assert the right to be human. To read Pram is to revisit the meaning of humanity under conditions of oppression.

Educational Impact in Malaysia

The adoption of Pramoedya's work in Malaysian secondary education, particularly *Keluarga Gerilya*, had a significant pedagogical impact. Students were taught to analyze texts deeply—not just memorize plots. His works opened up discourse on psychological characterization, colonial history, and subaltern nationalism.

Pramoedya shaped the critical thinking of Malaysian students, instilling awareness of suffering and nation-building. Ironically, during Suharto's suppression of Pram in Indonesia, Malaysian education embraced his legacy more fully—demonstrating a more open cultural policy.

Literature and Symbolic Power: Pramoedya as a Regional Discourse

From a postcolonial perspective, Pramoedya is a subaltern symbol who rewrites history from below. Silenced in Indonesia for decades, he was celebrated in Malaysia—not only as a great author but as a voice for historical consciousness. This transnational literary acceptance exemplifies a "cultural bridge" across political and ideological divides, positioning Malaysia as an epistemological space where regional intellectual heritage is preserved and honored.

Conclusion

Pramoedya Ananta Toer did not merely write the history of his people—he built intellectual bridges across the Malay world. While silenced in his homeland, Malaysia gave him a platform, recognizing his value as a humanist and cultural visionary. Malaysian scholars emphasize his aesthetic, ethical, and historical contributions rather than his political controversies.

In sum, Pram's reception in Malaysia is a testament to literature's capacity to transcend political borders and to celebrate our shared humanity. He remains not just a novelist, but a conscience of the oppressed—his legacy not only textual but ethical and intellectual across the postcolonial world.

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