

Pramoedya Ananta Toer: Defying Oppression Through Literature A Legacy of Freedom of Speech and Human Rights in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Pramoedya Ananta Toer's literary works serve as both a historical testimony and a defiant act of resistance against state repression in Indonesia. This study examines Pramoedya's contributions to literature and human rights, highlighting how his works have shaped discourse on freedom of speech and democratic principles in Indonesia. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, this paper analyzes his writings alongside historical and legal developments concerning free expression. Despite Indonesia's democratic progress, defamation and blasphemy laws remain tools of suppression, echoing past restrictions. Through comparative analysis, this study underscores the enduring relevance of Pramoedya's literary resistance in advocating for unrestricted intellectual freedom. Safeguarding free speech is not merely a legal obligation but a fundamental commitment to truth and justice, ensuring that voices like Pramoedya's are never silenced again.

KEYWORDS

Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Literature, Freedom of expression, Indonesia



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Introduction: Repression and the Role of Literature

Literature holds the power to voice the truth in situations where the people's voices are silenced. Throughout Indonesia's history, many writers have used their works as a form of resistance against injustice and repression. From the colonial era to the digital age, literature has served as a symbolic space for conveying social and political critique, both implicitly and explicitly.

Literary resistance is a form of expression by oppressed groups who use literature as a symbolic weapon to voice social and political injustice. Writers become the representatives of an enlightened society, conveying criticism through poetry, short stories, novels, and drama. Douglas Kellner argues that media culture reproduces discourses of social struggle and reveals the fears and sufferings of ordinary people. Literature, as part of media culture, becomes a tool for voicing oppression and shaping collective identity. [1]

During the New Order (Orde Baru) era, strict censorship led writers to express criticism implicitly. Through the *Buru Quartet*, Pramoedya Ananta Toer portrayed the struggle against colonialism, which also served as an allegory for contemporary repression. [2] Novels such as *This Earth of Mankind* (*Bumi Manusia*) and *Child of All Nations* (*Anak Semua Bangsa*) not only depicted the colonial experience but also served as veiled critiques of contemporary repression under the New Order regime. The government banned many of his books and detained him without trial for years, an unmistakable sign of repression against intellectual freedom.

This paper explores how Pramoedya consistently defied oppression through his literature, transforming personal suffering into powerful narratives that championed freedom of speech and human rights. It examines his artistic and ideological evolution, particularly through his experiences of imprisonment and exile, and analyzes how his works, especially *the Buru Quartet*, serve as a profound legacy, continuing to inspire advocacy for democratic values and human dignity in Indonesia and worldwide.

Social Critique and National Reflection

Pramoedya Ananta Toer stands as a central figure, not only for his influential body of work, but also for his resolute use of literature as a means of resistance against oppression and violations of human rights. Through his writing, Pramoedya gave voice to defiance against state repression and championed freedom of expression amid a highly restrictive political climate [3]. His works not only captured the socio-political realities of his time, but also left a vital legacy in the struggle to uphold democratic principles and justice.

Human Rights: His narratives are replete with characters who are victims of injustice, whether at the hands of colonial powers, feudal elites, or authoritarian regimes. He meticulously documented the plight of the marginalized—the native intellectuals, peasants, women, and political prisoners—thereby humanizing abstract notions of suffering and highlighting the fundamental right to dignity and justice [4].

Pram's narratives are replete with characters who are victims of injustice, whether at the hands of colonial powers, feudal elites, or authoritarian regimes. His works, particularly *the Buru Quartet*, vividly portray the struggles of native intellectuals like Minke and marginalized figures such as Nyai Ontosoroh, who resist systemic oppression and reclaim their dignity in the face of colonial subjugation.

Freedom of Speech and Thought: The most central theme in Pramoedya's work and life was the imperative of free expression. He believed that truth-telling and the unfettered exchange of ideas were essential for a just society. His own struggles against censorship, both in terms of the banning of his books and his long

imprisonment for his political beliefs, made him a global icon for freedom of expression [5].

The central character, Minke, a Javanese student educated in Dutch colonial schools, becomes a symbol of intellectual awakening and resistance against colonial and feudal oppression. Through Minke's journey, Pramoedya explored the transformative power of knowledge and the perils of silencing dissent. The Buru Quartet itself is a monumental act of linguistic and narrative freedom, demonstrating the power of words to reclaim history and assert identity in the face of an oppressive system that sought to erase them.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer regarded writing as a space for liberation. At a time when freedom of speech was silenced, he wrote with his hands, mind, and memory as a form of protest. This act transformed literature into a medium of nonviolent resistance. His works consistently emphasized the values of humanity, justice, and intellectual emancipation. In numerous interviews and essays, Pramoedya underscored the importance of writing as a moral obligation. He believed that a writer must not only observe society but also participate in its struggles, using literature to confront injustice and preserve truth [6].

Anti-Colonialism and Nationalism: While these themes were present in his early works, his later writings, particularly the Buru Quartet, offered a more complex and critical examination of colonial power dynamics and the internal contradictions within the nationalist movement. He highlighted the often-overlooked agency of indigenous people and exposed the hypocrisy and brutality inherent in foreign domination [7].

This Earth of Mankind (Bumi Manusia), the first novel in the Buru Quartet, the character Minke embodies the spirit of intellectual awakening and resistance against colonial oppression through education and writing.

Child of All Nations (Anak Semua Bangsa), the second book in the Buru Quartet, the continued development of the character Minke exemplifies this engagement, as he grapples with the burgeoning anti-colonial movement and the diverse identities within the archipelago, thereby fostering critical thinking and historical awareness among readers.

Footsteps (Jejak Langkah), the third installment of the Buru Quartet, Minke's persistent efforts to establish an indigenous newspaper and articulate the plight of his people directly reflect Pramoedya's conviction that the unhindered flow of information and ideas is essential for achieving broader social justice and democratic ideals. Through Minke's struggles, Pramoedya illuminated the profound

link between free expression and the pursuit of a more equitable and just society, cementing his legacy as a staunch advocate for human rights and democracy.

House of Glass (Rumah Kaca), is told through the eyes of Jacques Pangemanann, a highly educated, conflicted, and ultimately compromised colonial police commissioner. *House of Glass* thus serves as a powerful examination of the tools of oppression and the profound human cost of both resisting and enforcing colonial rule.

Minke's journey from a privileged student to a politically conscious writer mirrors the broader awakening of indigenous agency, as he confronts not only the brutality of Dutch imperialism but also the elitism and compromises within the native nationalist elite. Through vivid portrayals of figures like Nyai Ontosoroh, a concubine who defies patriarchal and colonial subjugation, Pramoedya illuminated the resilience and complexity of those often excluded from official histories. His work challenged readers to reconsider the meaning of liberation—not just from foreign rule, but from inherited systems of injustice within.

Historical Consciousness and Memory: Pramoedya saw history not as a monolithic narrative but as a contested space, often deliberately distorted by those in power. He dedicated himself to excavating forgotten histories, particularly those of the common people, believing that an accurate understanding of the past was crucial for a progressive future. His novels, steeped in meticulous historical detail, sought to restore a sense of agency and memory to a nation whose official history was often sanitized or fabricated [8].

The protagonist Minke, a Javanese youth inspired by the real-life journalist Tirto Adhi Soerjo, navigates the complexities of colonial society while awakening to the power of historical consciousness. Through Minke's evolving awareness, Pramoedya critiques the erasure of indigenous agency and reclaims forgotten figures like Tirto, whose contributions to the nationalist movement had been deliberately obscured. By weaving archival research into compelling fiction, Pramoedya transformed literature into a vehicle for historical recovery, reminding readers that memory is not only a personal act but a political one, essential for shaping a just and self-aware society.

The Contemporary Relevance of Pramoedya's Works

Pramoedya Ananta Toer's literary legacy remains profoundly relevant today, as his writings continue to awaken critical consciousness among younger generations regarding freedom and justice. His narratives, rooted in historical and political struggle, resonate with contemporary readers navigating issues of inequality, censorship, and authoritarianism.

Contemporary activists, scholars, and artists frequently cite his works as sources of inspiration and intellectual courage. His characters—particularly Minke in *This Earth of Mankind*—embody resistance against systemic oppression and serve as models for challenging entrenched power structures.

As a public figure, Pramoedya has become a lasting symbol of resistance to intellectual repression. Even in the digital age, his image and ideas are reinterpreted and circulated widely, including through internet memes and academic discourse, reflecting his enduring impact on Indonesia’s cultural and political imagination [9].

Although Indonesia has undergone a democratic transition since the 1998 Reformasi movement, recent reports indicate a significant decline in civil and political freedoms:

1. The 2025 World Press Freedom Index ranks Indonesia 127th out of 180 countries, a notable drop from previous years, reflecting deteriorating conditions for journalists and media independence [10].
2. Freedom House continues to classify Indonesia as a “flawed democracy”, citing a steady decline in civil liberties and the politicized use of defamation and blasphemy laws [11].
3. Amnesty International recorded over 500 cases of criminalization of freedom of expression between 2019 and 2024, most of which involved the use of the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (ITE Law) [12].
4. Recent incidents include the arrest of a university student for creating a meme of President Prabowo and former President Joko Widodo, and the disbandment of art and theater performances deemed critical of the government [13].

Despite Indonesia’s continued democratic transition, freedom of expression remains under strain, with so-called “rubber articles” such as defamation and blasphemy laws still invoked to suppress dissent. This reality suggests that the fight for intellectual freedom is far from over. Adopting a qualitative approach, this paper seeks to re-examine Pramoedya’s contributions to the discourse on freedom of speech and human rights, while underscoring the importance of safeguarding critical voices from being silenced once again.

Implications and Future Directions of the Struggle

This study underscores the importance of protecting the right to freedom of expression as an essential component of upholding human rights. Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s legacy teaches that the struggle must continue through intellectual and cultural avenues, where literature and critical thought serve as enduring tools of resistance.

Legal reform is urgently needed to position freedom of expression as a cornerstone of democratic governance. The continued use of vague legal provisions—such as Indonesia’s Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law, demonstrates the necessity of revising legislation to prevent the criminalization of dissent and ensure public accountability.

Moreover, literature and the arts play a strategic role as forms of “soft resistance” against injustice. Artistic expression fosters empathy, provokes critical dialogue, and mobilizes communities toward social transformation. In this context, Pramoedya’s works exemplify how storytelling can challenge authoritarian narratives and preserve the dignity of marginalized voices.

Conclusion

The works of Pramoedya Ananta Toer are not merely part of Indonesia’s literary heritage, but also a representation of resistance against repression and a symbol of the struggle for freedom of expression. Through bold and powerful narratives, Pramoedya gave voice to those silenced by authority, defended human values, and encouraged the emergence of critical awareness regarding social and political injustices. He demonstrated that literature can be a weapon of resistance as sharp as any other.

However, the current state of freedom in Indonesia shows that the struggle is far from over. Although democratic governance has eliminated some forms of past repression, flexible legal articles, such as the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE), defamation, and blasphemy laws, are still used as tools of silencing. Journalists, artists, and activists continue to face intimidation, persecution, and even criminalization when expressing criticism.

Thus, Pramoedya’s intellectual legacy remains relevant and urgently needs to be kept alive. He taught that safeguarding freedom of expression is not merely a battle of the past, but a shared responsibility today—to ensure that truth never loses its voice.

Suggestions

1. The government must ensure freedom of expression for writers and artists. Writers and artists are the conscience of society, they question, provoke, and illuminate the truths often obscured by power. When their voices are silenced, society loses its mirrors and its moral compass. Censorship breeds fear, and fear stifles progress. By protecting the right to express without intimidation or criminalization, the government doesn’t just uphold human rights—it nurtures a culture of critical thought, innovation, and social resilience. A nation cannot claim to be truly free if its storytellers are muzzled. Therefore, safeguarding artistic expression is not only a legal obligation, but a moral imperative.

2. Literary literacy education should be strengthened to foster critical awareness.

Literature is more than art, it's a lens through which people understand power, identity, justice, and the human condition. When students engage deeply with literature, they don't just absorb stories—they question norms, recognize bias, and cultivate empathy. In an age of information overload and social polarization, the ability to read between the lines is a vital civic skill. Strengthening literary literacy equips future generations with the tools to challenge misinformation, think independently, and speak out against injustice. It's not just about reading books—it's about shaping minds that can read the world. Failing to prioritize this is not a neutral omission; it's a step away from democratic integrity.

3. Literature should continue to be promoted as part of social movements and human rights advocacy.

It humanizes oppression, amplifies silenced voices, and transforms abstract injustice into lived experience that moves people to act. When movements embrace literature—be it poetry from political prisons, novels from exile, or spoken-word protests—they gain emotional power and moral clarity. Art creates empathy; empathy drives change. In a world where statistics often desensitize and headlines blur together, stories cut through. Promoting literature within advocacy isn't optional—it's strategic, powerful, and deeply human. If we want to build a more just and conscious society, we must keep literature not at the margins, but at the heart of the fight.

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