Asialink event: Tribute to Pramoedya Ananta Toer, 31 May 2006, 6.00 – 8.00 pm at Yasuko Hiraoka Room.
Talk by Dewi Anggraeni

The first time I read *Bumi Manusia*, was in mid 1980s, I can't remember exactly when. I was younger, much less experienced, but blissfully unaware of the extent of my inexperience.

It was not easy, but I read it through. I was reading a story saturated with bitterness and an intensity so powerful it was suffocating. It was dense. It was unrelenting. Looking back I realised what had happened: I was confronted with the choice of allowing myself to be hit with its full force, or duck to avoid the attack.

I ducked. So while I was safe, I also missed out on the actual, the real enjoyment of suffering the impact of the pain, part of the prerequisite to understanding the story.

It was more than twenty years ago. I was not ready. I justified my cowardice then by saying that I couldn't assimilate the story. Pramoedya's depiction of Nyai Ontosoroh, the novel's real main character, I thought, was over the top. It was impossible to be so instensely bitter and unforgiving, yet still living. In short, I wasn't sure it was feasible.

I had read Pramoedya's earlier works; they were compulsory texts at school, and compelling read as well. He had always been intense, and yes, there always was a vein of bitterness going through his plots. But reading *Bumi Manusia*, was like being pushed into a corner while the world was closing in on you. So when I finished, I felt as if I'd just been released from a figurative prison. I walked out, and never went back. Until recently.

To my surprise, when I began rereading the novel, I was overwhelmed by a different gamut of emotions, empathy being the strongest among them. I was no longer seeking to avoid the assault. Yes it was still a powerful overall assault on my senses, but somehow I was ready to take it.

Nyai Ontosoroh and Minke not only leapt out of the pages, they also dragged me into the story.

For those who haven't read the novel, or have read it a long time ago and forgotten a lot of it, I'll give a brief synopsis.

The story takes place in the late 19th century Surabaya, East Jawa, then part of the Netherlands Indies. The narrator-protagonist, Minke, a son of a local aristocrat, was sent to HBS, a prestigious secondary school mainly for children of European parents or of European fathers who are recognised by their fathers. Minke stands out – mostly in an invidious way, being the only indigenous student in the school.

Then a fellow student, Eurasian Robert Suurhof, takes him to a place which is to change his life forever. Suurhof wants to show off the young woman who has stolen his heart, the sister of his friend Robert Mellema. However, Annelies Mellema falls for Minke instead.

More importantly, there Minke meets Annelies and Robert's mother, the common-law wife of their father. Known as Nyai Ontosoroh, she is an extraordinary, remarkable woman, who doesn't do anything in half-measures.

Nyai's own father, driven by his irrepressible ambition to be a purchasing officer of a Dutch-owned company he worked for, effectively traded her in for that position. Nyai never forgave her father for that, nor her mother for not standing up for her. She disowned her parents and refused to see them again. She even did not attend their funerals. As she'd say to her daughter Annelies later, 'They were not my parents.'

Her master Herman Mellema, treated her relatively well. Not long after taking Nyai, he resigned his position, and founded an agricultural business. He taught Nyai to read and write, bought her books and magazines and taught her the nuts and bolts of running an agricultural company. Nyai learned like a person possessed or driven. She was indeed driven - by her anger and bitterness at her own powerlessness vis-à-vis her own life. And within a few years, she already mastered everything Herman Mellema taught her, as well as giving birth to their son Robert, and daughter Annelies. Mellema never married Nyai, though he legally recognised the children.

And very quickly Mellema relegated all the work of running the company to Nyai.

When Minke meets Nyai, he is convinced she is an educated woman, because of her exquisite mastery of the Dutch language, her manners and her grooming. And from then on, she keeps surprising him with her breadth and depth of knowledge, which in many ways surpass his, a final year student of HBS. What baffles him however, is the intense bitterness he sees in her. The whole reason of her bitterness, part of which I've mentioned above, is to be unravelled bit by bit in the novel.

Mellema, we discover, retreats from life, a broken person. Not broken by Nyai. In fact, what broke him has had a detrimental effect on Nyai, Robert and Annelies. Yet despite all adversity, Nyai keeps on going, partly for herself, partly for the beautiful but tragic Annelies.

Minke eventually marries Annelies, but their union is to be shortlived, destroyed by a chain of circumstances which reveal the injustices, the hypocrisy and the inhumane colonial law.

The continuous inner struggle and bewilderment of Minke, who has to face demands and unrealistic expectations from his own people and treatments full of inconsistencies by the colonial masters, is depicted extremely well. He rebels against his own cultural tradition, hence becomes detached, from his family entourage. Yet when he tries to enter the new grounds, where his education leads him, he is incessantly pushed back by insults and humiliation, intentional or inadvertent, dished out by those who keep reminding him of his inherently inferior indigenous background.

With a few exceptions such as his Dutch literature teacher Magda Peters, the Mellema's family GP Dr Martinet, the Surabaya Assistant Resident Herbert De La Croix and his daughters Sarah and Miriam, and the newspaper editor Marteen Nijmaan, most of the apparachiks of the colonial authorities, as well as those in the private enterprise Minke meets, are mostly rejects from the Netherlands itself. They come to the Indies and become instant lords, despite the fact that many, in terms of human qualities, are not any better, in some cases even worse, than the ones they lord it over.

To see Nyai, an accomplished autodidact, being repeatedly, coarsely insulted by these human rejects, is very testing, to say the least. And if you haven't felt empathetic throughout the novel, by the end of it you will have embodied her constant frustrations, anger and bitterness, even if not to the same intensity.

The ambience created by the colonial attitudes toward the ingenous people, permeats the whole population, the local indigenous rulers resentful but having to acquiesce, a lot of the indigenous community suffering the inner polarisation of wanting to respect tradition yet having to get on in life. Many Eurasians are tortured by the discrepancy of reality and ambition. One such example is Robert Mellema, who deeply hates and resents his mother for being indigenous, who wants so much to be pure-blood European, who despises everything and anybody indigenous, a situation which finally brings him to his own destruction.

Bumi Manusia, while set in late 19th century Surabaya, is a perennial story, relevant to today's situation in so many spots in the world, where some people hold power over others, writing the rules of the game, not by merits, but because they belong to a particular group, be it race, privileged class or simply because they are in a position to use brute force. Or maybe all three.

I am glad I read *Bumi Manusia* again. A finer work I have rarely come across.