

## Essay

### PRAM'S FIGHT FOR WOMEN

**T**he inherent role of literary critics is to provide a bridge between social classes that share the same living space but are separated by a main-moth gap.

In Indonesia, fiction in the form of short stories and novels are predominant, and Indonesian critics do not refrain from giving critiques that are direct and blunt, but that amaze in the manner they maintain personal integrity, objectivity and fairness. One writer who has captured the attention of the country's literary community is the late Pramoedya Ananta Toer.

Pram showed an exceptional affection for the female gender in his works. His literary plexes showcase an array of intricate portrayals of different women in a way that is unrivaled by his literary peers, who often portray men as the main characters in fiction, while marginalizing and stereotyping women as prostitutes, sweethearts or mothers.

In Pram's view, women should be acknowledged. In particular, he acknowledged his mother's conspic-

uous presence in his life, and claimed he got everything in his life from her. His works personified the Indonesian upheaval in a female form and as such, his mother inspired many of his works.

Yet Pram was highly critical of gender issues. He criticized the condition of women in Javanese society during the feudalism era in the novel *Middah Si Manis Berigi Emas* (*Middah, The Sweet-heart with a Gold Tooth*). In the novel, Pram disparages Haji Abdul for selling his daughter, Middah, to wed a rich man to fulfill his ambitions. Set in 1950, the story follows Middah, a young woman from a well-known religious family, who, because of problems at home, runs away and lives on the streets of Jakarta. She is strong and earns a living playing songs from house to house, becoming known as "the sweet Middah with a gold tooth".

Pram's views were also refined. In the novel *Bumi Manusia* (*This Earth of Mankind*), he depicts Nyai Ontosoroh, a mistress of a Dutchman, as a brave and strong woman. She becomes aware of the need for freedom. Being a woman



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who has attained a European education and has mastered its traditions, Pram uses her to show that women should not be underestimated in the fields of business and academia. Nyai fights for her independence and to possess sovereignty for her people, society, family, children and herself.

Pram's characterization shows how a person can be nurtured to challenge and oppose oppressive power without yielding or sacrificing one's class or personal integrity. Pram swam against the tide of the dominate ideology in which his works

were created. The women in the entirety of his oeuvre are depicted in a positive light and he argued that women's stories were needed to solve gender issues.

Pram was highly critical of the male dominion. In *Bumi Manusia*, the male dominion was represented in the Javanese and colonial cultures. Nyai is a commendable woman. She was a concubine of a Dutchman during the colonial period and later fights against the barriers of dependency and suppression placed before her by Javanese society.

Meanwhile, in writing *Gadis Pantai* (*The Girl from the Coast*), Pram aimed to address the inequality that exists between men and women, as propagated by *prigayi*, a cruel nobility system in Javanese culture. Pram himself was brought up and educated to become an excellent Javanese, having been born into the culture. However, he later left the nobility and became progressive. His works reflect humanism and are crafted from elements of Javanese culture, redirected to portray a sense of social realism and morality that carry both

truth and beauty.

In *Gadis Pantai*, Pram offers a critique of the nobility, based largely on the experiences of his grandmother. In the novel, he depicts the role of women in the feudal era of Javanese culture, when young women had their marriages arranged by their parents.

The novel tells the story of a girl who is married off at the tender age of 14 to a nobleman from Rengas. Customs had it that if she delivered a female child, she had to leave her spouse's house without the baby. According to Pram, during these times in Indonesia's history, marriages to local women meant little to noblemen as their wives could be reserved until the time they were ready to give birth or until the man became disinterested in them and discarded them.

Throughout his career, Pram made clear that fighting for women was his ideologically literary endeavor.

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