

## The Library of Congress Preserves the Work of an Indonesian Master “Indonesia’s Tolstoy” Receives Renewed Attention

Officials at the Library of Congress are preserving the work of an author at once little-known and world-renowned—and they are doing it in Jakarta. Far from the world of Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, Indonesia’s Pramoedya Ananta Toer stirred the hearts of millions across Asia. Today, a year after his death, the Library is continuing a special program to conserve his personal papers.

Pramoedya—or Pram, as he is affectionately called—is best known for his “Buru Quartet,” a series of four novels detailing Indonesia’s struggle against Dutch colonialism. Popular for their prose and historical imagination, the books also won critical acclaim for exploring the moral dilemmas of collaboration and the psychology of colonial (and anti-colonial) identity. Nominated several times for the Nobel Prize, he has been called “Indonesia’s Tolstoy.” But, in the United States, few have heard of him.

The Library’s project may change that. Working closely with the author’s family, the Library is collecting and safeguarding Pramoedya’s novels, short stories, speeches, and personal papers. The project, which is expected to continue for years, is based out of the Library’s Jakarta office, a forty-person unit tasked with bringing rare and hard-to-acquire Southeast Asian resources back to the organization’s headquarters in Washington, DC.

But, to many, Pramoedya’s most compelling story is not found in his novels, but in his life. Cast in prison for suspected communist leanings in 1965, the author remained in shackles for fourteen years. It was in his Buru Island jail cell that the author began drafting his now-famous Quartet. Deprived of writing materials, he relied on the spoken word and smuggled scraps of paper to develop what became his masterpiece. Though he was released in 1979, his novels remained banned for the remainder of President Suharto’s long rule, known as the “New Order.”

Ironically, his works, passion, and advocacy helped fuel the intense protests that forced Suharto to resign in 1998. Speaking to the *Financial Times*, the author reflected upon this twist of history. “I have won,” he said. “The New Order has fallen and my writings have been translated into 40 languages.”

At the Library of Congress office in Jakarta, such widespread distribution does not make the collection and preservation of the author’s papers any easier. But it does make it more important. When completed, the project is likely to confirm the author’s assessment, but not as he intended. History will show that Pramoedya won, but not because of fame. Rather, the advocate’s last victory may be Indonesia itself: a vibrant democracy at long last pursuing Suharto for his crimes.