
Voicing Change: A Comparative Reading of Selected Works by Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Katharina Susannah Prichard

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Abstract

Although coming from different historical and political backgrounds, Indonesian Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Australian Katharina Susannah Prichard both have used their writing to rehearse their concerns with the social and political situations in their respective societies. In *The Girl from the Coast* (1987) and *Coonardoo* (1929), they create the setting for a staging of the effects of colonial, racial and gender ideologies on the lives of marginalised and oppressed individuals. Through the characters of *The Girl* and *Coonardoo* respectively Pramoedya and Prichard hold up a lens to an awakening concern with minorities in specific periods in Indonesian and Australian societies. The novels' main female characters serve thus as spokespersons for an agenda of social and political change that characterise the work of Pramoedya and Prichard.

This paper will examine how these two novels depict marginalised groups in Indonesia and Australia and the significant role these groups play in both challenging and sustaining a national memory. To this extent it is concerned with how they are positioned as well as how they position themselves in the patriarchal and colonial societies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Pramoedya's and Prichard's shared perspectives on political and social matters lead to some comparable aspects in the way they depict the social dynamics in the texts. Readers are led to see the tensions between identity and class/race and family and nation through the eyes and the voices of the marginalised women characters.

Keywords: comparative literature, voicing change, Pramoedya, Prichard

A. Introduction

Indonesia and Australia share a similar history of colonisation by European countries, namely the Netherlands and Britain respectively. The first Dutch expedition to Indonesia (East Indies) arrived in 1596 in search of spices. Soon after the conflicts among Dutch companies led the *States-General* (Netherlands

parliament) to merge the companies into the United East India Company, the VOC (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*) in 1602 (Ricklefs, 2008: 29). “States-General gave VOC power to raise armies, build forts, negotiate treaties and wage war in Asia” including Indonesia (<http://www.gimonca.com/sejarah/sejarah02.shtml>). Ricklefs claims that a Dutch colonial state was consolidated over the period 1800 until 1910. The Javanese-European relationships took a new form when Marshal Herman Willem Daendels, Governor General in Batavia in 1808, “treated Javanese lords not as lords over their society but as officials of the European administration and reduced their power and incomes” (2008: 135). This so called Dutch modern imperialism involved “political and military behavior in the Indonesian archipelago” (Locher-Scholten, 1994: 91). Moreover, even though Indonesia proclaimed its independence in 1945, the Dutch only recognized the formal transfer of sovereignty to the ‘Republik Indonesia Serikat’ (Republic of United States of Indonesia) in 1949. For its part, Australia was ruled by the British from 26 January 1788, the date when Captain Arthur Philip arrived in New South Wales and “carried instruction to establish the first British colony in Australia”, the land that was called ‘*Terra Australis Incognita* (unknown southern land)’ (<http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/european-discovery-and-colonisation>). Ann Curthoys suggests that at that time Aboriginal peoples had settled the entire continent for around 45,000 years. They had diverse languages, dialects, and “each society was multilingual” (in Schreuder and Ward, 2008: 79). Even though the six British colonies federated as the Australian nation in 1901, many so-called Australians still saw themselves as British; furthermore, attitudes and policies concerning Indigenous peoples in Australia remained colonialist (96-97). The fact that the Dutch left Indonesia after the independence is a major difference in the colonial of Indonesia and Australia. Australia remains technically connected to its colonial power, as after 1901, the colonial British became settler Australians.

It is arguable that having been colonised by European countries, the literatures of Indonesia and Australia might reflect similar patterns of experience. It is well known too that not only did colonisation create physical and mental sufferings for the colonised people, but it also changed the physical landscape as well as the identities of the individuals living in the colonies. Moreover, the sufferings of the colonised people did not only occur during the colonisation but also persisted after the colonial situation had officially ended, since colonisation is maintained through both coercive and hegemonic power (Antonio Gramsci cited in Kurniawan, 2002: xiv). To some extent, the worldview of the colonists goes on controlling the minds of the formerly colonised people, through apparatuses such as education and the arts.

B. Discussion

The legacy of colonialism exists in many aspects of people’s lives in the colonies. For the purpose of this paper, I want to suggest that this is the case in literature, for example. Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin argue, “... the relation between the

colonisers and colonised was locked into a rigid hierarchy of difference deeply resistant to fair and equitable exchanges, whether economic, cultural or social" (1998: 46). Besides, racism is also "a crucial part of the intercultural relations" in the colonies in which "minority indigenous people existed" (1998: 46). This is especially the case for women, since in societies such as Indonesia and Australia, patriarchy is typically a strand of hegemonic power and under colonialism women may be seen to be doubly disadvantaged. As Loomba writes: "Their relationship to colonial discourses is mediated through this double positioning" (2002: 159). Gayatri Spivak too says that, "Women in many societies have been relegated to the position of 'Other', marginalized and, in a metaphorical sense, 'colonised', forced to pursue guerrilla warfare against imperial domination from positions deeply imbedded in, yet fundamentally alienated from, that *imperium*" (cited in Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1998: 174). Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin add that women, like post-colonial people, "share with colonised races and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression, and like them they have been forced to articulate their experiences in language of their oppressors" (1998: 174-175). As a result of the ideological alignment between colonialism and patriarchy, "colonisation could be (re)presented as a virtuous and necessary 'civilizing' task involving education and paternalistic nurture" (1998: 47). In Australia, the case is complicated by the 'colonised' white Australian women occupying a colonizing position in relation to Aboriginal women *and* men, something that will be explored further in discussion of *Coonardoo* in later chapters of the thesis.

In Indonesia, the Islamic practices and Dutch colonisers affected women's lives in multiple ways. Blackwood notes that the power of gender formulations in Islam works hand in hand with "Dutch masculinised culture and religion: in this setting, 'women's leadership and power in state and religious contexts" are unjustifiable (2005: 859). Stoler further continues that men were regarded as "the fit rulers and leaders of nation and home" (cited in Blackwood, 2005: 864). The marginalisation of women occurs in all domains or in all classes. Consequently, women are dependent on their husbands legally and economically (2005: 861).

Similarly, colonisation in Australia also disadvantaged women, both native Indigenous and settler women. Anne Summers in *Damned Whores and God's Police* (1980) has examined the condition of women in the history of Australia and argues that "women's experience of being Australian differs fundamentally from men's" (461). Even though many men experienced exploitation in terms of class or race, they retained the benefits of their gender or the 'superiority' of their sex. They had "freedom of movement" and "the existential security of an identity bestowed by possessing a name which is indisputably theirs", two things that women cannot access (461). The oppression of women appears in every area of their lives. For instance, women's dependency upon men can be seen in their surname that was previously granted from men, their fathers and husbands respectively (461).

However, in Australia, it was Aboriginal women who suffered the most from colonisation. Summers quotes from a 19XX submission by ACOSS to the Poverty

Commission: "They are discarded by the community for not being the right colour, the right sex – lacking in language, in education, in training, in available or accessible job opportunities, ill-prepared to function in a white society, unable to get into the white service systems, unreached by birth control methods, producing children many of whom are destined for early death and the rest to live a life of poverty" (1980: 130). Summers further asserts, "White men in this country have almost always treated black women as whores, as women to have sex with (and maybe leave with half-caste babies) but not as women to marry" (130).

In Indonesia, the situation of the 'native women' under Dutch colonialism was different from Australia. For example, only upper class indigenous women (nobility/*priyayi*) could get access to education. Locher-Scholten states, "While colonial authorities considered women of the Indonesian elite open to education and change, they thought that women of the rural masses should be left in their own cultural environment as much as possible. ... Ultimately, colonial policies towards women and the family were mainly directed at women of the elites" (2000: 28-29).

Two indisputably great writers from Indonesia and Australia, Pramoedya Ananta Toer (he is typically referred to by his first name) and Katharine Susannah Prichard, respectively, explored many of the above issues in their writing. Both have employed historical reality as the setting or background for their work. In this way they give voice to the oppressed and, as Maxim Gorki stated, let people know their history (cited in Kurniawan, 2002: 2). In Pramoedya's own words, "If we don't know our history, we'll always make the same mistakes, the same year after year" (cited in Vatikiotis, 2000: 79). Pramoedya set his stories in the era of pre-World War II, Dutch colonial period, the Japanese Empire occupation, the Indonesian revolution, and the Indonesian national movement (Kurniawan, 2002:1). Of Prichard, Judah Waten, a communist writer, claims, "When Australians of later generations want to know what their country and their people were like in the first half of the twentieth century, they will have to read the works of Katharine Susannah Prichard" (cited in Beasley, 1993: 9). Indeed, the history of women's conditions in Indonesia and Australia during colonialism, analysed by Blackwood and Summers, are found in the selected novels of both Toer and Prichard. In *The Girl from the Coast* (hereafter *The Girl*), Pramoedya deals with Javanese nobility and commoners living under Dutch colonialism; whilst in *Coonardoo*, Prichard takes up the themes of Aboriginal lives under the legacy of British imperialism. In these novels, both writers depict the experience of subjugated peoples, particularly female characters, in dealing with gender oppression in both patriarchal and colonial societies. Both Pramoedya and Prichard employ central female characters of mixed race and class, the Girl and Coonardoo respectively, to criticize injustice in the society under patriarchal colonial systems.

My choice of Pramoedya's *The Girl* and Prichard's *Coonardoo* relates to what they have in common as writers, but also to the fact that their novels adopt a comparable feminist postcolonial issue. Pramoedya and Prichard represent the major female characters, the Girl and Coonardoo, as women and subaltern subjects

who are shaped and framed under a patriarchal and colonial society. These two characters are, in one way or another, caught in a clash between marriage and family, and a conflict, not only in their minds, but also between their expectations, and the subordinate place that patriarchal and colonial society enforce upon them. However, both the Girl and Coonardoo are strong characters who can show their subversion to their subaltern status either by radically reacting against subjugation or by being silent. Women's identities under patriarchy and colonialism as well as their resistance are the major points that will be explored in the paper.

Pramoedya and Prichard are regarded as prominent literary figures in their countries and as social realist writers. Pramoedya has long been recognized as Indonesia's most significant literary voice. During the first two decades of Indonesian independence from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, he established himself as the country's leading prose writer, the celebrated voice of revolutionary nationalism in literature and culture (GoGwit, 2003: 217). A prominent Dutch literary scholar, Teeuw, argues that in his massive literary works, Pramoedya exposed "the course of Indonesian history during the twentieth century" as well as his own experience during this period (1997: 253). Teeuw asserts that Pramoedya's works marked the phases of colonialism, revolution, post-colonialism, and neo-colonialism in the history of Indonesia. They follow his experience of living under Dutch colonial rule, engaging in the physical revolution and war against colonialism, imprisonment in the colonial period, witnessing "a failed revolution under Soekarno's post-colonial Indonesia, as well as being prisoner under 'neo-colonial regime of Soeharto'" (1997: 253). For example, Pramoedya unveiled the struggle of the local nationalists to fight Dutch colonialism in *A Heap of Ashes* (1975), and the resistance movement against the Japanese in *The Fugitive* (1975).

Similarly, Prichard, who received the *Bulletin* prize for *Coonardoo* in 1928, was regarded as one of the pre-eminent cultural figures in the early twentieth century of Australia (Bode, 2008: 444). Sheridan asserts that Prichard together with Henry Handel Richardson, Miles Franklin, M. Barnard Eldershaw and Jean Devanny was regarded:

... as [a] serious writer with a social responsibility to national cultural development and the defence [defense] of freedom of expression. They regarded their writing as an art that required constant attention and reshaping to fit the new requirements that social change made of it. European literary modernist techniques were adapted to the requirements of social realism – and the romantic and comic traditions of popular entertainment were mostly by-passed in the process (cited in Bode, 2008: 443-4).

As with Pramoedya, who witnessed three changes in power in Indonesia (Dutch colonialism, Japanese occupation and Indonesian government), Prichard also lived under the phases of both World War I and World War II, inter-war depression

(Jalland, 2005: 42-1) and revolution (Throssell, 1975: xii). These all shaped Prichard's life. Throssell wrote about these stages:

They are part of her own story; as are the labours of the militant political movements in Australia with which she was identified. Her personal triumphs and tragedies were the calendar by which her days were measured. But, sometimes, it is the insignificant events of a past day which leave their trace upon memory. These things, too, have a part in her story (1975: xii).

Prichard firstly encountered Socialist Realism in 1933 during her visit to the Soviet Union (Ellis, 2003: 204) and Buckridge states, "Prichard's realist techniques were forged before the establishment of an official Communist Party doctrine of socialist realism" (cited in Lever, 2011: 58). Prior to the propagation of socialist realism by the Communist Party in the late thirties, Prichard had already built her works by depicting the working classes' struggle against oppression, a central aspect of literary socialist realism. For instance, *Coonardoo* and *Working Bullocks* were published long before her involvement in the Communist Party. Lever asserts that the novels denote "a committed communist's attempt to develop a technique for expressing political beliefs while responding to Australian material conditions" and are "undeniably the work of a woman whose perspective insists on examination of the relations between men and women, and an understanding of women's position in those relations" (2011: 58). Prichard uses social realism as the means to voice the oppression of women. Socialist realism regards writers as "the engineer of souls" and demands that literary works should reflect the struggle of the working class people to overcome their subjugation (Lever, 2011: 58).

Pramoedya too was considered a socialist realist writer (Kurniawan, 2002: 2), and from the start his writings were characterised by strong ideological views. Teeuw has stated, "Indonesian nationalism is the ideology underpinning practically all of Pramoedya's literary work, ..." (1997: 254). Besides, a concern with issues such as social injustice, human rights, politics, degradation of humanity, raising human dignity, as well as struggle of women living under the injustice system of society all are a mark of his writings (Teeuw, 1997; Kurniawan, 2002; Manuaba, 2003; Isak cited in Toer, 1999). A survey of his major works though, shows that women's struggle as the main theme does not appear as consistently as Indonesian nationalism. Nevertheless, Teeuw suggests that women have played a significant role both actively and passively since the early stage of Pramoedya's writings (1997: 261).

Some critics claim that Pramoedya's fascinating female characters represent his mother's influence on his work. His mother is seen as the inspiration for the women in a number of his writing, such as *The Girl, This Earth of Mankind* (1980), and some short stories in the collection of short stories in *Cerita dari Blora* ('Stories from Blora', 1952) (Samuels in Toer, 1999: xiv; Kurniawan, 2002: 16-17). Haridas points out that when Pramoedya's parents fought over about family problems, such as money and his father's gambling addiction while they faced a difficult economic

problem, Pramoedya was more likely to stand up for his mother than for his father. Yet, Pramoedya admired his father's nationalism, and often he has reflected this in his writings (1978: 49). Apart from Pramoedya's mother, a noblewoman and national heroine, R.A. Kartini, "a pioneer in the struggle for women's rights and as a model mother", is the other inspiration for Pramoedya's women characters. In fact, he wrote a semi autobiography of Kartini and in *The Girl*, Pramoedya draws on the figure of Kartini to create a character who serves as 'a foil and as a potential role model for the Girl and her descendants' (Aveling in Toer, 1991: x). In the Introduction to *The Girl*, Aveling reveals that Pramoedya had a high regard for Kartini because of her bravery in standing up to the Dutch that made the Dutch and Javanese aristocrats respect her (ix-x).

Pramoedya's concern for oppressed people and for history became even more apparent when in 1959 he was associated with *Lekra* (*Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat*), the Stalinist-influenced People's Cultural Association, an organization that was initiated by some socialist realism writers (Samuels in Toer, 1999, xvi; Kurniawan, 2002: 91; English, 2003). Since some of the founding fathers of *Lekra*, such as D.N Aidit and Njoto, also belonged to the Communist Party, this organization and Pramoedya too were seen as communist, though not all the members of *Lekra* belonged to the Communist Party (Kurniawan, 2002: 89-91), and Pramoedya never declared himself a Communist (Samuels in Toer, 1999: xvi). However, after his short visit to China in 1956, Pramoedya's vision became those of *Lekra* and of the Communist Party, regarding culture as inseparable from society and politics. Literature is seen as part of politics and becomes a form of political propaganda. The motto, "politics is in command", characterized the work of art in *Lekra* (Kurniawan, 2002: 93; Heinschke, 1996: 147). Pramoedya's involvement with *Lekra* eventually became one of the reasons why his works were banned by the Indonesian government for a long time, even though at the same time they were internationally accepted. His critical views of the government often set him in conflict with state power and Pramoedya's works were banned and destroyed both during Dutch colonial rule and under the Indonesian New Order regime. For instance, *Ditepi Kali Bekasi* (1951) was taken by the *Nefis* (Netherlands Indies Field Security) and was never returned to Pramoedya (Kurniawan, 2002: 31). *The Girl*, which was originally published as a newspaper serial, a long-standing publishing tradition for literary work in the colony, should have been a multi-generational trilogy depicting the rise of the anti-Dutch nationalist movement (in which his parents and he were involved), but the rest of the manuscript was destroyed by the Indonesian military under the Soeharto regime (Teeuw, 1997: 254). This destruction of the other two parts took place in the clash in 1965 and Pramoedya himself was arrested on 13 October because of his affiliation with leftist politics. Teeuw says, " ... only the first part of the trilogy had been published in *Lentera*, the cultural section of the daily *Bintang Timur*" (1997: 262).

As with Pramoedya, Prichard frequently focuses on subjugated people, particularly women. Delys Bird says, "Although Prichard always believed that the

class struggle predominated over sexual politics, she also always supported women's issues, acknowledging women's particular social positioning. Although rarely radical, her ideas on women remained in many ways ahead of her time and were not static" (2000: xviii). *Working Bullocks* and *Coonardoo* are two of the works that represent "the relations between men and women, and an understanding of women's position in those relations" (Lever, 2011: 58). In *Coonardoo*, the author conveys her "passion for social justice and sexual equality" (Magill, 1987: 326). In 'The Cow' and 'Painted Finches', Prichard depicts "women who do not articulate such views [expressing emancipated attitudes towards female sexuality and women's intellectual and economics lives], yet their lives are used to convey them. The potential for women's emancipation, however, is always underlined by a deeply conservative concept of the true role of women, which is maternal and domestic" (Bird, 2000: xix). Magill notes further, "Her political commitment as a Communist, pacifist, and feminist were more fully in evidence in some of her later novels, notably her highly acclaimed gold-mining trilogy" (1987: 326). She was regarded as a feminist writer and "her political commitment and interest in the lives of women has never been in doubt" (Lever, 2011: 58). Beasley also states that Prichard "had a clearly worked out and defined [her] attitude to, and a life long record of participation in, the movements of her time to achieve equal status for women" (1993: 12).

Besides getting involved in women issues, Prichard's writings also reflect her concern on socialism and communism. Prichard's commitment to Socialist Realism in 1933 influenced some of her works. Ellis notes that Prichard employs the elements of Socialist Realism, "*partinost, ideynost, narodnost, klassovost*" in her writings (2003: 204). Ellis further points out about the relationship between Socialist Realism, her involvement in left-wing politics and her work:

... all of her [Prichard's] novels after *Windlestraws* are set (almost) entirely within Australia and display a sense of the national character, hence satisfying the demands of *narodnost*. All are populated with working people and are concerned with the lives of the working classes (*klassovost*), and many applaud the actions of a proletarian or socialist hero. All are committed, to some extent, to a progressive and in some cases radical ethos of social reform (*ideynost*). It is the one remaining component of Socialist Realism, *partinost*, which proved to have such a profoundly significant impact on these later novels. ... By including *partinost* in her work Prichard was, in effect, employing a new narrative strategy (204).

In short, Pramoedya's *The Girl* and Prichard's *Coonardoo*, tell the story of women who were oppressed by the patriarchal colonial societies in which they lived. Both works were inspired by the authors' own experiences and observations, too. The following is Teeuw's summary of the story of *The Girl*:

It tells the story of a young girl from a fishing village who is taken as a concubine by the feudal lord in the nearby town. The illiterate and ignorant

girl is submitted to shocking experiences in her master's compound, but she somehow manages to adapt herself to her new status. Despite this, after she has given a birth to a daughter, she is sent back to her parents while her baby has to stay with the father. After performing her duty she has become 'disposable' (1997: 262).

Coonardoo describes a love relationship between a white cattleman and an Aboriginal woman. It is based on Prichard's own observation of Aboriginal lives on a cattle station in the far north of Western Australia.

Both the Girl and *Coonardoo* are subordinated as women and as subaltern subjects under the patriarchal society and colonialism of European countries, Dutch and British respectively. Both occupy an inferior position in relation to men, although this operates differently in terms of class and race. The oppression of colonial and patriarchal system occurs more emphatically in *Coonardoo* than *The Girl*. At some points, both show compliance but in their own particular ways they also subvert this domination.

C. Conclusion

In this paper, the construction of women's identity in *The Girl* and *Coonardoo*, is analysed to reveal how doubly colonised women deal with the dominant patriarchal colonial ideology of the period. The Girl and *Coonardoo* are situated in a subordinated condition, both as women and subaltern subjects by virtue of their class or their race within colonial systems. The oppression of colonial and patriarchal system occurs most dominantly in *Coonardoo* whilst the central issue in *The Girl* is class conflict. At some points, both main female characters show compliance with hegemonic power. However, at the same time, and in their own particular ways, they subvert dominant modes. Accordingly, the nature and extent of their resistance will be investigated and related to the socio-historical contexts in and of each novel. Critics have shown that both authors' backgrounds as socialist realist writers inflect the characterization and narrative outcomes of the texts.

The Girl and *Coonardoo* are set under the colonial period at the end of the nineteenth century in Indonesia and the beginning of the twentieth century in Australia. I realize that whilst readers from Australia are quite familiar with *Coonardoo*, readers from Indonesia might have not read it, and similarly the reverse will be true of *The Girl* for Australian readers. Therefore, before analysing the texts I would like to briefly summarise the story of each text.

Gender and class discrepancies also exist under the racial colonial circumstances of *Coonardoo*. On the other hand, *The Girl* deals primarily with a class clash between the Javanese aristocrats and commoners during Dutch colonialism. In this case, the colonialism was mostly the shadow of the main issue of patriarchal domination in Javanese aristocratic society. In this particular aspect of invisible Dutch characters, Teeuw said that it has been one of the remarkable things that

characterize Pramoedya's writings. They seldom appear in his texts; in other words, "they are 'the invisible enemy', as it has been formulated" (1997: 254).

Another major difference occurs in the resistance of the female characters depicted in both novels, one of the key concerns in my dissertation. The way the authors depict the resistance of the subjugated characters in the novel might be also determined by their own position in the society. Pramoedya was subject to colonial oppression, as a 'native', while Prichard was 'a part of the problem' in a historical sense, a member of the colonizer community. Their different positions might consciously or unconsciously influence the way they deal with the colonial/postcolonial issues in their texts. Postcolonial critics look for traces of oppressive discourse in texts where the oppression goes unnoticed by the writers' compromised position. But as a male writer, Pramoedya's position towards gender discrimination might be not as marked as that of Prichard. As noted earlier, the themes of women and gender in his work are not as obvious as those of nationalism in Pramoedya's writing. In contrast, Prichard's interest in voicing gender injustice has never been in doubt except, for some critics, in the case of *Coonardoo*. Furthermore, Pramoedya's position as a Javanese might also affect the way he constructs the narrative outcomes. The different personal backgrounds of the authors will be investigated for the way in which they inflect the development of the stories.

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