

Generational Politics in Toer's Work

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ABSTRACT

Throughout Pramoedya Ananta Toer's work, the reader can discover the younger generations that were leading the movements for progressive change within Indonesia. One motive to demand change was the desire to escape from the constant warfare the young generation had experienced under the rule of the Dutch and Japanese. The difference of ideology between the present and past generations, as a result, created a generational divide. Toer's work fictionalizes, and comments upon, the generational divide between parents and children that was evident in 1950s Indonesian politics. We will see this political, economic, and social strife play out along the lines of this generational divide in Toer's short stories. These changes ushered in by the young generations are seen in the areas of political leadership, societal norms, and the economic structure.

Keywords: *Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Generational Politics, Indonesia*

1. INTRODUCTION

Pramoedya Ananta Toer, a renowned Indonesian writer, was born in Blora on the island of Java in Indonesia in 1925; he began writing when he was in Dutch forced labor camps from 1947-1949. This imprisonment may have influenced his views during his writings as seen with his first novel, *The Fugitive* (1950), which he wrote during this time. This work discusses a poor Javanese youth based in Blora—where Toer was from—who revolted against the Japanese Army. After the war, he joined a nationalist revolt against the Japanese forces, one similar to what Toer joined. The similarity between the protagonist and the author of *The Fugitive* is not a coincidence; in hindsight some may argue that the book was a road map for Toer's life. The story shows what young Indonesians should have done to fight for freedom against the Japanese. In this story the reader can easily see that Toer is not really writing about fighting against the Japanese, who were kicked out in 1945, but rather about the ongoing fight against Dutch rule. In 1965, Toer was arrested again and placed under house arrest for his involvement in the protests against the increasing autocratic rule of the cult of personality surrounding President Sukarno, an Indonesia nationalist; as a result, Toer's writings were banned, and his unpublished writings were destroyed. In 1969 he was transferred to the Buru Island Camp, where he began a tetralogy discussing the Indonesian revolt against the Dutch rule, and the anti-colonial mass movements. In the first few years of imprisonment, to prevent the spread of his ideas, Toer wasn't allowed to write. As a result, Toer told his stories to his fellow inmates, whom he asked to memorize sections of the work. When he was allowed to write again, he placed the ideas on paper.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Indonesian Politics During Toer's Life

Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world by population, was invaded by the Dutch in 1595. In 1796, the Dutch East Indies company went bankrupt, as a result Indonesia was handed over to the Dutch state. After a period (1942-1945) of occupation by the Japanese empire, Indonesia was granted independence from the Dutch. In 1945, upon the surrender of the Japanese, Sukarno was appointed the president of Indonesia in the fight for independence from the Dutch. After independence in 1945, Indonesia's economy had to recover from the. By the 1950s, there was little growth in the economy due to the lack of a centralized government. At the time Indonesia was investing heavily in their military and as a result there was hyperinflation within the country. Sukarno's ineffective methods meant that Indonesia suffered from an economic depression. Matters got worse in 1963, when President Sukarno engaged in a period of warfare called the Indonesia-Malaysia; the war started due to border conflicts between the two nations. As a result, in 1967, President Sukarno was removed from office and President Suharto replaced him. President Suharto was anti-communist; Indonesia rejoined the United Nations and in 1967 became a founding member of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations.

Suharto is considered a dictator, because he controlled state enterprises and violated numerous human rights. In the 1970s and 1980s, Indonesia thrived under Suharto; the economy was increasing steadily, the literacy rate increased, and the living standards increased. Suharto brought order back to Indonesia but in doing so there was large-scale corruption and bloodshed. However, due to the

economic recession in the 1990s, Suharto resigned from office.

Economically Suharto introduced the “New Order” which was his plan that operated under American ideology to reinvent the economy. Suharto opened Indonesia to the rest of the world and encouraged investments; he focused on funding infrastructure, instead of the military. Under President Suharto’s regime, inflation dropped from 630% to 9% [1]. However, Toer subtly criticized the New Order, and the corruption in the new government. In 1979, when Toer’s sentence switched to house arrest, he became a leading figure in fighting for human rights and freedom of speech in Indonesia.

Communism and Nationalism in Indonesia

Communism in the modern sense begins with Karl Marx and his 1848 publication of the Communist Manifesto. The major tenets of communism are: there is no private ownership, religion is outlawed, and gender equality [2]. Concerning economics there will be more income equality; subsequently, everyone has a job.

Nationalism, on the other hand, operates through the idea that “your nation belongs to you, so you make the decisions.” This idea appealed to the civilians of Indonesia after centuries of colonization. Sukarno used nationalism to unify Indonesia for the first time in its history.

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3. GENERATIONAL POLITICS IN TOER’S WORK

This paper will show how Toer’s writing represents the philosophy of a younger generation of intellectuals, like himself, that wanted an independent but more equal, both economically and socially, Indonesia. Toer uses his characters to exhibit social and political implications of their time. The younger generations felt the need to modernize post-independence Indonesia. Through reading Toer’s work, we can discover the differences in ideology of past and present generations, as well as the generational divide created by these differences.

Generational divide informs opinions about military dictatorship, as we see in Toer’s short story “Independence Day.” In the story, the main character, Kirno, is a veteran

from World War II. He sadly reminds his former fiancée: “My friends are dead, Ati. They died and are now forgotten” [3]. From this quote, readers can understand Kirno’s views on the military, especially since he was greatly injured and destined to use a wheelchair, which is the cruel reality of war. Unlike Kirno, his parents are nationalists, and they take pride in the country’s military. In the short story, his family greets guests at the Independence Day parade and celebrates the national holiday. The difference in opinions regarding the military and national politics is evident in the short story. Toer routinely uses characters who were injured or maimed during war in order to remind the reader of the violence of warfare.

Support for nationalism is a common political ideology in Toer’s writing, especially in the short stories “Revenge” and “All that is Gone.” In “Revenge,” nationalist soldiers are seen torturing a Japanese prisoner. The main character demonstrates the ideological divide between nationalists and communists; he wants independence but wonders if he and the society are losing parts of their humanity. These self-doubts can be seen in the following two quotes: “If in fact I had any sense of humanity left in me, I would have leaped into the crowd to protect the pilgrim (the Japanese Spy), even if he were a spy” [3] and “This is not the way humanity works. I was a coward, which is just a synonym for traitor.” [3]. Again, Toer uses his protagonist to express a certain point of view: the protagonist disapproved of the violent actions taken against the Japanese prisoner.

In the short story, “All that is Gone,” the father in the story is a schoolteacher who is often not home. He is a nationalist helping out the country at the expense of being separated from his family. Father leaves home to try and spread the ideas promoted by Sukarno. Elsewhere, in the short story “Acceptance,” the main character Sri, an 11-year-old Indonesian girl “was forced to sacrifice her own educational future in the family’s struggle to survive” [3]. The father in the story is a nationalist, as seen in the quote: “Sri’s family, who had been infused with a sense of nationalism both at home and in school, welcomed independence whole-heartedly and accepted as natural the tangle of difficulties that came with it. Her father immediately joined the National Organizing Committee, which had been established to formulate guidelines for the new nation” [3]

This short story was set during the time of the invasion by Japanese forces. In the writing, Ies, Sri’s older sister, is a supporter of the communist cause. Influenced by her peers, she quickly joins the communist insurgents. Through the difference of ideology on the topic of the future governing system, a generational divide between Ies and her father is indisputable. When her father found out that she had joined the communist movement, he reacted by saying: “Anyone who wants to take down the Red and White to fly the Red flag is a traitor and a renegade” [3]. The quote shows that the father supported nationalism because the “Red and White (flag)” is the flag of independent Indonesia.. In the story, the father was open about his negative beliefs about communism. As a result, the readers

can assume that Toer was against the idea of dictatorship because of his writings and his involvements that led to the fall of President Sukarno. To amplify the generational divide between father and Ies, the father is killed by a communist soldier. In other words, Ies was part of the movement that led to the death of her own father.

In Toer's writings, social issues are also an important aspect of the generational divide as seen in the areas of gender equality and Islam's place within society. Toer, who was supportive of gender equality also respected many of the teachings of Islam. In the short story "Acceptance," Toer touched on gender equality issues under communism by openly showing the beliefs of Ies. Readers are able to understand Toer's perspective on this issue through Ies' comment: "There's no reason that women can't do what men do. Under communism men and women have equal rights" [3]. Also, in the story "Independence Day," we again see a generational divide with regard to gender inequality. As the story progresses, Kirno, the handicapped soldier, felt that he was losing his status as the eldest male in the family, which is a very important traditional role, to his school-age younger sister. He felt that his physical injuries and his depression worsened being taken care of by a girl, specifically a younger sister who is not considered equal. Readers learn that Kirno is depressed when he states, "I can't do anything, I don't want to do anything, I don't need anything anymore—not the Seventeenth of August [National Independence Day in Indonesia], not a thousand independence days. All I want is death." [3]. Kirno sank deeper into depression because of the disappointment to him and his family that he was not able to fulfill his role as eldest son. One-way Kirno deals with this issue is that he bosses his sister around in an attempt to assert his dominance. Kirno's further attempts at a semblance of power frustrates his mother who says to him: "That's all you ever want. Don't you have any feelings left? You punish your sister by ordering her to sing all the time and chase away anyone who comes near you" [3]. As Kirno departs to a home of invalids, he confesses to his family that "I just don't want to be taken care of" [3]. The reader can assume that Kirno is referring to being taken care of by his younger sister which belittled him, and he never returns to his family as he never could accept to lose his power.

Islam's place within Indonesian society is central to the short story, "All that is Gone." In this writing, the family's father was the principle of the local school and as a result he was often not present in the house. Conversely, the mother took on the role as the leading figure in the family. In the short story, she is a Muslim woman who is devoted to her religion. The mother character in the story is a traditional woman who was not fighting against society but instead she was trying to keep her family together. Unlike other stories, the focus of "All that is Gone," surrounds the idea of peace. Toer uses the story to show not only the power of woman but also the role of Islam in keeping cohesiveness within a family.

Economic issues are also an important aspect of the generational divide as it is figured in Toer's work,

especially regarding the areas of women in the workplace and income inequality. Toer was supportive of women having the same opportunities as men as seen in the short story, "In Twilight Born." The short story mimics his personal upbringing as the mother, in the story, takes care of her children due to the absence of her husband; similarly to Toer, whose father was also not present in his upbringing, and as a result his mother played an influential role in his writings. Indeed, the importance of his mother to his writing is evident in this 2018 essay on him: "He [Toer] acknowledged his mother's conspicuous presence in his life, and claimed he got everything in his life from her" [4]. These experiences may have influenced his ideology for gender equality in his writings.

In addition, Toer also criticizes the gap between the wealthy and the masses in the short stories, "Inem," and "Independence Day." In the short story "Inem," the young innocent Inem was sold off to another family for financial relief at the age of 8. She was abused physically, mentally, and sexually by her husband and family [3]. Inem's condition demonstrates the injustices many women faced in Indonesia. From an income inequality standpoint, Inem getting married would result in gifts from the community which would lessen her family's financial burdens. Another reason for Inem to be sold off to another family was in hopes of marrying a wealthy young man so that she would have a better future. In this story, Toer presents these issues that were caused by income inequality.

In the story "In Twilight Born," the work of women is central to the message. In this story, the women of the village lead the movement of swadesi, or the production of handicrafts. The women had "giv[en] new life to handicraft production, making it possible for the villagers to live." [3]. In this short story, women are a vital part in the survival of the village as they make it possible for the village to afford clothing because of the extreme income inequality in society. This inequality had women taking an unusual role as paid workers. That extreme income inequality is not healthy for a society or even family relations. Through this example, Toer demonstrates the importance of women in the workplace and changes that were brought forth within Indonesian society.

Wearing handicraft clothing becomes a symbol of rebellion against the Suharto government, that enforced heavy taxes on daily necessities. Toer reacted to these actions by writing: "There are taxes on everything these days, and we have to bear their burden" [3]. Suharto encouraged imported goods and ideas from the western world as stated in the New Order. Toer was supportive of the oppressed and encouraged them to develop their own goods and rebel against the Suharto government. In fact, his fictionalized self says, "Have you ever heard of the Samin people? They are a tribe in far western Java that refuses to have anything to do with the outside world, including payment of taxes. I say cheers to them!" [5]. This is, of course, one way forward for the Indonesian people. And, elsewhere in the story, we learn: "Even people of the upper class were wearing clothes made out of lurik (homespun cloth)" [3]. Unity through women's handicrafts is possible, and at least part of the Indonesian

population is willing to protest Suharto and his oppressive measures. Hurip, a young intelligent man who was considered the leader of the second generation in the house, expresses his own opinions of the importance of contributing to the cause against Suharto's government. The readers are made aware of his intelligence by the constant intellectual comments he makes such as "we need the courage to reject the idea that working for the government as a civil servant should be our ideal" [3] and "Ever since the rise of feudalism in this country, the ruling class has enjoyed undeserved authority" [3].

"It's things like wearing locally made cloth that give meaning to swadesi, the whole point of which is self-subsistence and to provide for our people. Our people need work to live, which means that if you're wearing imported clothing, you're depriving them of both jobs and income. In the end it's foreigners who are making all the profits." [3]

The quote above is yet another example of Toer's brilliance of hiding his ideas in plain sight. Toer repeatedly uses the word "The Dutch," [3] the readers are able to come to the realization that he was referring to Suharto's government. He knows that if he wrote that people should fight against the ideas of their government, his imprisonment would be imminent, or worse he could be given the death sentence, so he uses the ideas of his characters and the imagery of his people fighting against the European colonialist power—the Dutch—which every Indonesian would support. This allowed Toer to write such incendiary words and ideas without further suffering. Toer continuously writes about the divide in society. He hopes that the younger generations will not be restricted by traditions of the previous generations. Toer focuses on the young generation as he hopes that Indonesia will metamorphosize into one he had envisioned; one possessing equality in all areas.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper analyzes the generational politics in Indonesia over Pramoedya Ananta Toer's work, and presents an overall picture of the changes led by the younger generations in areas including political leadership, societal reforms, and economic development. Through a careful review of Toer's literary works and characters, this paper also revealed the ideological differences between past and present generations, as well as the generational divide created by these differences. This paper offers a comprehensive overview of Toer's philosophy on generational politics. It provides a summary of earlier literature and also sheds light on the direction of research in the future.

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