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Jedamski, D.A.; Poeze H., Liem A.

Citation

Jedamski, D. A. (1998). The Short Story 'Mole' by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. A personal comment. In L. A. Poeze H. (Ed.), *Lasting Fascination. Essays on Indonesia and the Southwest Pacific to honour Bob Hering* (pp. 58-61). Stein: Yayasan Kabar Seberang. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16008>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

DORIS JEDAMSKI

The short story 'Mole' by Pramoedya Ananta Toer

A personal comment

On 17 August 1969, a boat departed from Nusa Kambangan. Its destination was Buru Island, in the Moluccas. On board were about 800 political prisoners from all over Java. One of them was Pramoedya Ananta Toer, being transferred from Salemba Prison in Jakarta and without trial deported and forced to work in the labour camps of Bum — 'sebagai hadiah ulang tahun Republik Indonesia' (as a present on the occasion of the anniversary of the Republic of Indonesia), as Pramoedya himself bitterly remarked.¹

In this short story — as is the case in most of Pramoedya's oeuvre, in particular his short prose — the author and his biography are very present. In this case, however, it is not Pramoedya's childhood, his family or Javanese background which colour the characters and the setting. The story openly deals with the author's personal experience in Salemba Prison and Buru Island labour camp and with the trauma of constant oppression that needs to be worked through and kept under control. There is, however, a second layer beneath the obvious. This story is more than a concise account of the persecution Pramoedya had and still has to endure under the Soeharto regime. It is about dreams, hopes and opportunities — and about failure. It is also the story of a young nation, the chances it took, the chances it could or ought to have taken, and the chances it maybe never had. By finally taking the reader into present-day Jakarta, Pramoedya leaves the shelter of historical distance he kept in his other works.

1946. Independence is within reach. The banned and banished are coming home, welcomed by the younger generation of activists. The narrator and the Mole meet for the first time. He, the man with the twin mole, has been fighting for an independent Indonesia, now he is handing down this task to the next generation.

Twenty years later they meet again: in Salemba Detention Centre in Jakarta. The reader never learns for what reason the narrator was put in gaol; it is not explicitly mentioned whether he is a political prisoner or

¹ Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Nyanyi tunggal seorang bisu*, 1984, p. 4. Manuscript.

not. Did he follow in the Mole's footsteps? There is no opportunity for them to communicate, to ask questions. While most of the political prisoners are finally transferred to Buru, only the Mole gets away by wittily tricking the oppressors. He is a free man now, but what kind of freedom has he achieved? What kind of society is he confronted with in 'independent' Indonesia? In the late 1970s, a new 'profession' has established itself: *pemulung*, garbage collectors. They literally live on the rubbish dumps, sometimes roaming through the neighbourhood, checking out the garbage of people who are better off, those who need some exercise in the morning to keep their weight under control. The narrator, like the author released in late 1979, turns out to be one of the 'better offs' after all, while the Mole and his young companion from Pacitan live on the darker side of Jakarta. However, they do not seem to mind; their conviction is unbroken, whereas the narrator develops a gnawing feeling of unease after he has met them again by chance. He tries hard to build up a relation of trust and solidarity, but fails. A couple of years later, he meets the two men again and, once more, he makes an effort to gain their trust. The Mole, almost a hundred years of age now and full of bitterness and anger, as well as his friend from Pacitan reject the narrator's approach in the end.

The story ought to end here, the narrator states, but obviously it cannot end yet. History continues and takes the reader into the year 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of Indonesia's independence. The chasm between rich and poor has rapidly grown. The strenuous attempts of the less privileged to gain minimal economic ground are recklessly destroyed by the greed and profiteering of the rich and mighty. Pedicabs and push-carts are confiscated, shacks on the rubbish dumps pulled down to make way for skyscrapers. The Mole dies while his home, a crate with iron-sheeting, is being cleared away. And his friend from Pacitan? He leaves the rubbish dumps, the city highways, the concrete flower pots to become an 'honourable Indonesian citizen': he now fights the primitive mind safeguarding Indonesia's future, the steadily growing number of street kids.

The Mole might be described as a wanderer through Indonesia's twentieth century history. He is not a talkative witness but practices self-chosen restraint instead. Still, he is the personification of hope, courage, disappointment, and anger. And there is his friend, the friend from Pacitan, standing for physical strength, continuity, solidarity — and optimism. The harder the narrator tries to understand them and to be accepted by them, the more he has to realize that he does not belong, despite the shared experience of oppression. He has a strong sense of solidarity, a distinct feeling on what side he wants to be, but he is living in a different world, a world apart from that of the Mole and his companion. 'No, you are not one of us', he is told after he has just 'shushed' the other in fear their conversation might be overheard. The narrator has received his 'personal certificate of scars', too, no doubt, although they might not be such obvious

scars. He is aware of the fact that many Indonesians are less privileged than he is. He does wish to take sides, he wants to help. Only it turns out he does not quite know how.

It is the author's voice speaking through all of his main characters, the Mole, the friend from Pacitan, the narrator himself, denouncing oppression and social injustice in present-day Indonesia, but also pointing out the burden of personal responsibility and moral obligation. He does, however, also acknowledge the helplessness of some who could make a difference, if they only knew how. There is no longer only good and bad, black and white, — the picture has gained a broad range of grey tones. (It comes as a surprise, however, to hear the Mole's comment on banishment under Dutch colonial rule in comparison to Soeharto's New Order. It is too much praise to possibly be the author's voice, one might think, particularly when remembering Pramoedya's tetralogy that brilliantly exposes the cruelty of the Dutch colonial system.)

Sometimes, though, the reader wonders whether the author himself would not rather fall silent, turn around his 'crate' as the Mole did, with the front facing the back. The Dutch put Pramoedya in gaol, so did the Japanese. Then his own people took away his freedom, but who are *his own people*? 'At the bottom line, what do you really know about your own people?' the narrator asks ashamed. He lives in a fine house in Jakarta, keeps old clothes in baskets. He reads the papers every morning and takes clippings, and he can afford to take driving lessons. He can even afford a confrontation with traffic law; he is so well known, even officials admire him as the scene with the policeman vividly illustrates. The narrator appears as a fragmented self-portrait of the author. And what a sparkling irony this reveals, — an ex-tapol, almost being asked for his autograph by an government official! Such a paradoxical situation actually occurred a few years ago after Pramoedya had been arrested yet another time for some flimsy reason in connection with his banned novels.² He had to endure numerous, long and exhausting interrogation sessions during which the official verbally attacked and humiliated him. Then, before he was finally released, that very official smiled and asked him for a signed copy of one of the banned novels, for he wished to give it to his wife as a present.

'I do not like this escapist literature [...], I was drawn directly to a literature that could provide courage, new values a new world-view, human dignity, and agency for the individual within society'.³ The story 'The Mole' is a perfect expression of this declared objective, but it also verbalizes a trauma. Pramoedya's trauma. Indonesia's trauma. National

² Personal communication.

³ Pramoedya Ananta Toer, 'Literature, censorship and the state; To what extent is a novel dangerous?' Essay written to be delivered on September 4, 1995, in Manila, later published in *Suara Independen* 1-4, September 1995. Translation by A.G. Bardsley.

independence is a high and desirable achievement but an intricate thing to handle with very little experience. The description of the narrator's driving trauma presents — intended or not — a somewhat ironical metaphor: It is difficult to use a vehicle with responsibility if you have never had the opportunity to familiarize yourself properly with this product of modernity. The narrator got a taste of the potential of such a 'magic vehicle' as a young man at the end of the Japanese Occupation. The situation, however, did not allow him much time to get accustomed to it. It was not before the political prisoners were released from Buru, that the utilization of another such vehicle seemed possible. Another attempt to learn how to control that tool of mobility and independence follows. But, obviously, one easily overestimates one's abilities, gets carried away and the result can be a disastrous crash and severe damage. Even more disturbing, however, is the fact that this kind of 'trial and error' learning seems to always hit and harm the innocent and underprivileged.