

# Women Warriors Empowered Women in Southeast Asian Literature

*Thelma Kintanar*

The figure of the woman warrior serves as a unifying image for the various representations of the empowered woman in the literatures of Southeast Asia. The works discussed — poetry from the Philippines and Thailand, fiction from Vietnam and Indonesia — present narratives of women in the struggle to free themselves from oppressive cultural traditions and cope with the disruptive events in the history of their countries. From the dynamics of this struggle, they emerge enabled, gaining control of their lives and participating actively in the process of social and historical change.

**T**HE TRADITION OF THE WOMAN WARRIOR ANIMATES THE ANCIENT history and literature of many Asian countries. The story of Fa Mulan, the Chinese village girl who disguised herself as a soldier and achieved fame and honor, has recently been popularized by the Disney empire in one of its few projects which has earned the praise of critics and feminists alike. The story comes from a ballad in the period of the Northern dynasties in China and tells how Mulan, to save her aged father from the dangers of war, joins the army in his stead. She endures rigorous training and countless difficulties but so distinguishes herself that she becomes a general in the emperor's army and is offered a high civilian post after the war. But although she has succeeded in empowering herself, Mulan is not interested in the exercise of power: she only wants to go back to her village and rejoin her family.

Even before Mulan became a household name, thanks to Disney, the Asian-American writer, Maxine Hong Kingston, had already re-

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tried her song, interweaving them into her prize-winning memoir, *The Woman Warrior* (1976). The story of the woman warrior provides Kingston with a sense of empowerment and resolution, as she attempts to understand and come to terms with the difficulties of her growing-up, torn as she was by the conflicts and contradictions between the storied past and restrictive traditions of her parents' China and the day-to-day realities of her life in modern-day California:

...as a child I had followed my mother about the house, the two of us singing about how Fa Mu Lan fought gloriously and returned alive from war to settle in her village. I had forgotten the chant that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind. She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman. (Kingston 1992)

Comparing herself to the swordswoman, Kingston notes that they are not unlike: 'what we have in common are the words at our backs.... The ideographs for *revenge* are "report a thing" and "report to five families". The reporting is the vengeance — not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words' (Kingston 1992). As a modern woman warrior, Kingston chooses her weapons: words not swords.

Similar stories of warrior women abound in many countries of Southeast Asia, some shrouded in myth, some chronicled in history. Looking at some of these stories in Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, one finds a commonality which makes them somewhat different from the story of Mulan. While Mulan's story is a successful attempt to transcend the restrictions of a strongly patriarchal society through female ingenuity (e.g. cross-dressing), stories of warrior women in these countries seem to be direct expressions of 'indigenous feminism' in cultures which more readily accept women for what they are or what they choose to be. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that some of these early societies were matrilineal

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(parts of Indonesia), matrifocal (ancient Vietnam) or had a bilateral kinship system (Thailand and the Philippines). Regardless, these stories, like the story of Mulan, have a 'power to remind', an enabling effect on women's efforts to empower themselves in the midst of their specific historical situations and circumstances.

It is not surprising, therefore, when we turn the pages of a recent issue of *Time* magazine (19 October 1998), to see the face of Megawati, the daughter of Sukarno and a leader of the opposition in Indonesia, portrayed on a banner held high by her supporters and underneath it the words boldly proclaiming her to be 'Srikandi Indonesia'. Srikandi is a legendary figure in Java, a character in the *wayang* stories (Javanese shadow play derived from the Indian epics) which provides Indonesia with models of leadership and ethical behavior. She is the wife of Arjuna, but is known for her independence and fearlessness as a woman warrior and to this day she continues to have a powerful grip on the Indonesian imagination (Douglas 1980). Following close upon her legend are precolonial historical accounts which tell us of powerful Javanese queens as well as female tribal leaders in Aceh, Borneo, South Kalimantan, etc. When the Dutch came in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and embarked on a war of subjugation, they faced women generals as well as common soldiers fighting alongside the men to defend Aceh, Bali and other parts of Indonesian soil (Morgan 1985).

In Thailand whose early history was marked by wars with the Burmese, women like Thao Thepsatri, Thao Sri Sunthon and Thao Sarinari (Mallica 1985) led armies while commoners, like the women of Bang Rachan (Darunee & Pandey 1991), defended their villages against pillage and invasion. In the field of women's rights, there were brave individuals like Andang Munan who refused to marry the man her parents chose for her or Amdang Char who refused to be sold by her husband. Both appealed to King Mongkut (Rama IV) who changed the law (Morgan 1985).

Ancient Vietnam, before it was conquered by the Chinese, was a matrifocal society. It is reported that when the Chinese conquered Vietnam, the Vietnamese knew their mothers' names but not their fathers', and that it was the women who proposed marriage and dominated trade and government. Even after the Chinese had imposed Confucianism,

women organized armies to drive them away as did the sisters Trung Trai and Trung Nhi in 40 CE and Thieu Tri Trinh in 240 BC (Morgan 1985).

In the Philippines, generations of schoolchildren grew up on the story of Urduja, the fearless warrior princess who ruled a kingdom in Pangasinan and relentlessly led her troops in battle. Her story, first narrated by Ibn Batute, an Arab traveler in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, drew the attention of Rizal who calculated that her kingdom must have been in northern Luzon. The claim to Urduja's being a part of our history has since been challenged by more recent historians; even so, her story remains deeply implanted in our consciousness and has become a symbol of Filipino women's courage and capability. More surely grounded in history is the story of Gabriela Silang who took over the Ilocos Revolt of 1763 when her husband was killed in battle. She is the prime symbol for the empowered woman in the contemporary women's movement and the largest coalition of women's groups, GABRIELA, is named after her.

The veins of this tradition thus run deep in Southeast Asia and have been mined by modern writers of the region in creative acts of recovery that help women to re-vision their lives and free themselves from the double bind of gender and history. In the fiction, the poetry and the lives of some of these writers, we see women who, in spite of the restrictive environments and limited opportunities of their particular historical contexts, are capable of empowering themselves to take control of their lives and even beyond this, to help shape the history of their countries and contribute to the lives of their people. Like Maxine Hong Kingston, these writers arm themselves and the women they write about not primarily with swords but with words. They recognize that it is in the field of discourse that the battle is contested.

*DARAGANG MAGAYON: WHAT'S IN A NAME?*

IN more senses than one, words bind generations through the stories they tell. The stories we listen to, from one generation to the next, may be enabling ones, like the story of Mulan or they may inscribe, deep in our consciousness, the image of woman as passive, weak, helpless and dependent. Thus, Filipino poet Merlinda Bobis, in her work, *Cantata*

of the Warrior Woman *Daragang Magayon* (1993), retells the story of Daragang Magayon (Beautiful Maiden) the legendary figure from whose grave rose Mt Mayon, the beautiful, mysterious volcano, famed for the near perfection of its shape. It is not a perfect cone, for if one looks closely, one sees that one side of the mountain has many wounds. In her foreword, the poet notes that ‘rumors’ of the many eruptions that caused the wounds have led her to also look closely at the story as originally told to her. In this story, *Daragang Magayon* was given in marriage to her brutish suitor Pagtuga, leader of a neighboring tribe, to spare her father from death and her tribe from war. She is rescued by her lover Ulap but dies from a spear wound.

The poet refuses to accept this story of *Daragang Magayon* as one ‘whose fate in both life and death was determined by the men around her’:

...I cannot attribute the life-and death-dealing power of this mountain to a figure of mere docile resignation and silence.

I know Daragang Magayon did not tell that story. It was spun by other tongues, like all of the stories that keep the lifelines of women from running beyond our supposedly ever-open and thus vulnerable, palms. Stories that make sure these palms do not clench into fists to mar the contours of perfectly neat plots. (Bobis 1993)

Thus, in her poem, she gives voice to *Daragang Magayon* and makes her sing her own song.

From the beginning of the poem, naming is the issue. Names are important, among the many words that we use to communicate, for they have the power to define ‘the value and quality of that which is named’ (DuBois 1979). Names can also disempower by projecting a false or narrow image of the one being named. Worse, it can cause that person to shape herself according to this image. In the prologue to the poem, the mountain speaks of how a name defines self and how it can curse and confine:

Once they called me Daragang Magayon,  
a name that means Beautiful Maiden  
A curse lurked in that name.  
I was hair and eyes and lips

And breasts and feet of fire.  
I was holy. I was religion.  
Maiden-bound I was desired;  
bold hunter's bounty,  
game and fruit trembling close  
to seeking lips and teeth  
that sink to tame.  
I was. I was a name.

(Bobis 1993)

Daragang Magayon herself tells how her name restricted her but also how easily one can accept others' images of one's self:

They chose a name that silenced me.  
My lips forgot to grow  
their private syllables;  
I was too busy chanting older gods.  
How I loved their eyes,  
the soft, soft 'yes'  
that gathered me,  
beautiful beloved of their tribe.  
It was so easy to be dumb  
And dance the figures in their gaze.  
.....  
How easy then to succumb  
to the cosy little room  
that makes a given name;  
the space is cleared and cut  
for you.

(Bobis 1993)

Daragang Magayon's story then is a story of 'unnaming'. From an early age, she is dissatisfied with her name and refuses to be bound to the fate others have chosen for her. Instead she learns to be proficient in the hunt and earns a new name: 'Sadit ni Makusog', Young of the Strong One. But the identity conferred by this name is not her own. She is still her father's daughter. It is 'still my father's name/Another baptism for vanities' (Bobis 1993). And it leads to still another baptism. While off on a hunt, she has an encounter with Pagtuga (Eruption),

chief of a neighboring tribe. She gets the best of this encounter but she does not enjoy the victory for long. Pagtuga brings formal suit and her father, Datu Makusog is pressured to agree to a betrothal to ensure peace between the tribes. So, even as she rebels against it — ‘Who is the author of names?/It is the one who doles out words/that sear the lifetime of the slave’ (Bobis 1993) — Daragang Magayon (henceforth referred to as Magayon) is given yet another name: ‘Agomon ni Pagtuga’, The Betrothed of Pagtuga. Her identity continues to be defined by her relationship to men and is subject to their demands.

When Sirangan, her beloved nurse, dies by the hand of Pagtuga’s man while she is trying to help Magayon protect herself from Pagtuga’s drunken lust, Datu Makusog breaks off the betrothal. Magayon grieves for Sirangan and her mother, Dawani, who died in childbirth, in a healing ritual wherein she goes every day to the seashore with the women to listen to their songs. These songs which are also the songs of her dead mothers, Sirangan and Dawani, take her back to primal memory and help her

to remember my many bodies  
And colors, clear again and burning.  
Woman. Warrior. Fish. Coral.  
Anemone. Brine. Earth. Bird.  
I chanted these names around  
the graves. I danced them:  
Yellow-armed, red-finned,  
green-boned, blue-fingered,  
saltwhite-nippled, black-bellied,  
brow-winged me whirling sand  
and whirling off the grief...

(Bobis 1993)

She becomes aware of the many names, the many selves available to her. While beside the sea, she hears another song echoing the women’s song. It is the voice of Ulap, a newly freed slave from Luzon who has been wounded by Pagtuga. This is a different voice — not one that attempts to possess her in power and lust but one that talks to her on equal terms. She takes him in and nurses him to health and they be-

come lovers in a relationship of 'skin and skull' where each is free to be herself or himself.

Meanwhile, Pagtuga is still demanding that Magayon be brought to him at the appointed time. His men capture Makusog but when Magayon tries to get the people to join her in a rescue effort, they are doubtful of its success without a male to lead them. They agree to consult the oracle and Magayon, dressed as a warrior woman, goes out to sea in a boat without outriggers. The question she asks, while holding a shield above her head, is: 'Should I marry Pagtuga?' to which the answer she receives is itself a riddle: 'What fish does not swim against the current?' Before she can answer her boat is engulfed in flames and sinks into the sea. This is her last baptism, a baptism of fire, and through it, she comes face to face with Magindara, the goddess of the sea, who gives her her final name: 'Nameless One Who Owns All Names'. She has finally shed her name, the identity that confines her, but even as she becomes 'nameless', she feels a sense of power at the many names open to her, the many selves she could be.

Back on land, she is revived after being given up for dead and conveys the voice of the oracle to her people. The answer to the riddle of the oracle is clear: only dead fish do not swim against the current. The whole tribe prepares for war and almost certain death for most of them since they are outnumbered by Pagtuga's men. In an exultant mood, Daragang Magayon prepares for death in battle: 'Ay, but what a day to die — /this half light is too beautiful for war' (Bobis 1993). For her victory has been won: not in combat but in 'unnaming' herself, in transforming herself from an object of men's gaze and men's desire to a warrior woman whose strength comes from the full realization of her elemental powers as a woman. From a story of woman's dependence on men to one of a woman's self-recovery and empowerment, Merlinda Bobis transforms the ancient legend into a fable for our time.

CHIRANAN PITPREECHA, A WARRIOR-POET

SOME of the finest contemporary poets in Thailand emerged during the period 1973-1976. This period was bounded by two significant events in Thai history. The first was the toppling of military rule under the Thanom-Prapas government in the student uprising of Oct-

ober 1973 followed by a period known as the Period of Democracy. The second event took place barely three years after, when a strongly authoritarian government was reinstated following a bloodbath instigated by rightist students in October 1976 on the campus of Thammasat University.

It is against this turbulent political history that we must view Chiranan Pitpreecha, a poet who played an important role in the student uprising. She did not start out as an activist: in her first year at Chulalongkorn University, she was chosen to be the 'Chula Star', a beauty queen who was expected to preside over social events on campus. But as a serious and intelligent student, she was uncomfortable in this role and was gradually drawn into the circle of young intellectuals who were committed to the cause of social justice and dedicated to fighting the corruption and inequality they found rampant in Thai society (Manas 1995).

Chiranan had a great deal to contribute to the student movement. A published poet at the age of 16 and even then displaying a social awareness in her poems, she used her considerable skills to write articles on politically sensitive issues (Manas 1995). She also expressed her concerns in poetry. The poems she wrote during this period reflected not only her convictions and personal commitment but were expressive of the mood of her generation and the idealistic temper of the time. Collected in the book entitled *The Lost Leaf*, they won for her the SEA Write Award in 1989.

One of the issues which concerned Chiranan deeply was the inferior status of women in Thai society. In her poem, 'The Defiance of a Flower', she challenges the traditional notions of women as weak, passive, existing mainly for man's pleasure and makes an impassioned plea for woman to be seen as a thinking, feeling, whole human being:

Woman has two hands  
To hold fast to life's core  
Her sinews are meant for work  
Not for the pampering of silk

Woman has two feet  
To climb the height of her dream

*Women Warriors*

To stand steadfastly together  
Not to draw on the strength of others

Woman has eyes  
To seek a new life  
To look widely into the world  
Not to attract and flirt with men

Woman has a heart  
Like a steady, glowing flame  
Amassing all the strength  
To become fully human

Woman has life  
To wash away errors with reason  
To value a person's freedom  
Not to feed men's dreams.

A flower has sharp thorns  
Not to open and await admirers  
But to bloom and preserve  
The earth's abundance.

(Chiranan 1989)

Besides being a traditional symbol for women, the flower image has historical associations in Thailand. During the nation-building period in the 1940s, after the 1932 revolution which changed Thailand from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one, Prime Minister Phibun exhorted Thai women to be 'flowers of the nation' (Manas 1995) thus emphasizing the soft, merely ornamental roles women were expected to play. The poem itself is skillfully crafted, progressing from woman's external attributes to her inner life and drawing all together by the image of the flower which the poet does not reject but skillfully subverts. Chiranan draws on traditional Thai poetic forms to re-image woman. Manas (1995) points out how

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she uses the classical *Kap* meter: 'the first three lines of each stanza state the new image and virtues of women as human beings while the fourth line of the stanza is the poet's subversion and actual rejection of the prevailing attitude on women in Thai society'. The pattern varies somewhat with the last stanza where, the task of subversion done, the last line leaves us with a strongly positive image.

After the Thamassat massacre in 1976, thousands of students and intellectuals identified with the Left went underground, including Chiranan and Seksan Prasertkul, the principal student leader of the 1973 student uprising whom she was later to marry. They worked with but did not formally become members of the Communist Party of Thailand (Phillips 1987). In her poems written during this time, we see her initial idealism and later, the growing disillusionment with her experiences in the jungle. Apparently, the students had ideological differences with the CPT about what Thai Marxism ought to be (Phillips 1987) and felt that the CPT leadership was out of touch with reality. Adding to these difficulties, Chiranan and Seksan had decided to have a child, a step frowned upon by the CPT which branded them 'revisionists'. The difficulties of caring for a child in the jungle forced them to leave the child with her grandmother, causing Chiranan further frustration and misery (Chiranan in Manas 1995). We see this in her poem 'Going to Carry Supplies' which describes the physical obstacles and difficulties she encounters in carrying out her task. But the images — the dark, misty sky, the long and twisted road, the cold rain, the blood-sucking snails — are symbolically resonant of the inner pain and anguish in her life.

Arranging my things, preparing my food  
To go to carry supplies from the East  
The rain comes, the sky dark and misty  
The road is twisted and long.

Thunder reared, a crashing sound  
The path is slippery, overgrown, damp and cold  
Mosquitoes, and snails sucking salt blood  
I must forge my way braving through.

Being a warrior does not negate the love and longing she feels for her child:

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In my heart, I hope that on my way back  
I might receive fresh news  
Of my separated child, so far away  
My darling is almost one year old

In spite of all this, she is still determined, still resolute:

Even when my sweat turns blood-red  
And my bones are sucked by the snails  
My lips are still firm, my fists still clenched.

(Manas 1995)

Chiranan and her husband took advantage of the amnesty offered by the government in 1980 and came down from the jungle, later to resume their academic pursuits and engage in graduate studies. Throughout all this, Chiranan has not stopped writing poetry. Another bloodbath in May 1992, when there was a military crackdown on anti-government protesters at Bangkok's Democracy Monument, brought forth her poem, 'The First Rain', which one critic has described as 'one of the most touching and most philosophically mature responses to that abominable act of fratricide' (Chetana 1994):

The first rainfall of May  
Streamed down in red,  
A torrent of steely rain  
That pierced human bodies,  
Flooding the streets with blood,  
With a river of deathly stench.  
How many stars did fall?  
How many hearts did break?  
The wound on this native soil,  
When will it heal over?  
Whose base power  
Dared slay the people?  
But the fighting spirit will go on.  
Death will awaken many.  
The spirit will persevere  
To preserve the people's rights  
The first rain has seeped into the earth,  
Has left its meaning, has created memories,

Has enriched the black soil  
From whence democracy will thrive  
(Chetana 1994)

The fusion of image, mood and emotion in the poem holds our attention. In the first six lines, the first rain of May which brings relief and nourishment to the parched earth at the end of the hot, dry season evokes instead the carnage that has taken place. The rain falls in a torrent of red, floodwaters become rivers of blood — images that intensify the horror of the event. Instead of raging, the poet is sadly reflective: ‘How many stars did fall?/How many hearts did break?/The wound on this native soil/When will it heal over?’ But the mood shifts in the next question as she asks in controlled anger: ‘Whose base power/Dared slay the people?’ The tone is not accusatory but places the responsibility squarely on the naked exercise of power. In the lines that follow, there is no recrimination, no call for revenge, only a reaffirmation: ‘But the fighting spirit will go on/Death will awaken many/The spirit will persevere/To preserve the people’s right.’ Out of death comes life — even as the poet reflects on the event and moves from feelings of horror, sorrow and anger to affirmation, the healing process has begun. She can now go back to the image of the first rain and reflect how the people’s suffering ‘has left its meaning, has created memories/Has enriched the black soil/From whence democracy will thrive.’ Although the poem never uses the first person, we feel it to be an intensely personal expression, distilled from experience, from the poet and her generation’s long and painful struggle for democracy. We also feel that, through her life and writings, she has earned the right to identify herself with the people, to speak for them. Distilled in these lines, her grief is the people’s grief, her vision is the people’s vision.

#### THREE WOMEN IN A DIVISIVE WAR

THE long political struggle of the Vietnamese to free themselves from French colonial domination and attain national integrity has been costly and divisive. It is against the backdrop of this struggle that Duong Thu Huong places her novel, *Paradise of the Blind* (1994). The historical background against which the novel takes place covers a fairly long time

span: from the sweeping land reform program undertaken by Ho Chih Minh as he consolidated his power in the north in the 1950s to the postwar years in the 1970s when the costs of the war in terms of economic chaos and extreme poverty were direly felt.

The novel does not focus on the war *per se* but on its material and psychological effects on the lives of ordinary people. It tells the story of two generations of women — Hang, a 20-year old former university student and now an ‘imported textile worker’ in Russia, her mother Que and her aunt Tam. The story is seen through Hang’s consciousness as she reconstructs her growing-up years in a Hanoi slum and the story of her family in a rural village in the north. On a long train ride to Moscow from her place of work in Russia, she reflects on the pattern of her life and the patterns her mother’s and aunt’s lives have taken. As she does so, the portraits of three women, so different from each other but so inextricably bound, emerge.

Que, her mother, is a broken woman in both body and spirit. Once a beautiful young woman married to a young teacher in her village, she is separated from her husband when his family is declared as belonging to the landlord class. In the divisive land reform campaign implemented in the village by her brother Chinh, a party official, the ‘landlords’ (anyone who owns even a small piece of land) are identified and their property confiscated. Worse, their fellow villagers are encouraged to denounce and vilify them and they are subjected to all forms of humiliation and debasement. Que’s husband, Ton, sensitive but weak, flees the village and Que who earns the ire of the villagers because of her brother’s tyranny moves to Hanoi. It is here that Hang is born when her parents are reunited briefly. But Que is soon left alone to care for her daughter with her meager earnings as a vendor until her sister-in-law, Tam, learns about Hang and helps to provide for her.

Raised in the Confucian value system and ingrained with a deep sense of filial duty, Que is torn by family loyalties. Much as she loves her daughter, when her brother Chinh re-emerges, she is torn between loyalty to him and the ancestral family he represents and her obligations to her daughter. She does everything she can to please him even though he shows no appreciation for such family loyalty which has no place in his life of political commitment. When he gets sick, she puts

all her earnings to paying for his medicine and other needs, working herself to the bone, sacrificing her health and starving her own daughter. Que's obsessive loyalty to her brother distorts her sense of values. She even uses the money and the jewelry Hang's aunt has given her niece. This leads to Tam's ire and to a coolness in Que's relationship with her daughter. Beset by poverty and poor health, obsessed by her loyalty to her brother, separated emotionally and physically from Hang who goes to live in a dormitory, it seems nothing worse could happen, but it does: she loses a leg in an accident. Her brother does nothing to help her and Hang is forced to leave university and work abroad for her mother's support.

Tam, Hang's aunt, is a strong woman in every sense of the word and responds to adversity in a completely different way. She takes all her suffering and her losses, not just of property but of family (her mother and brother), stoically. Even before she is reclassified as a middle peasant in the 'Rectification of Errors' campaign, she loses herself in work, doing the most backbreaking tasks, never for a moment sparing herself. Highly capable and willing to endure much hardship, she succeeds in everything she does and soon restores her home to its former beauty, amassing both property and money. All her efforts, however, are done to feed the spirit of bitterness and revenge that alone animates her.

Her life changes when she finally gets to see and meet Hang. Then she vents her emotions in an outpouring of love for her niece and pride that someone is left to carry on the family. Like Que, Tam is imbued with Confucian values, and she can never entirely forget or forgive the destruction of her family and home. Still, her love for her niece, even if it is single-minded and sometimes overwhelms Hang, has a healing effect and allows her a measure of self-recovery. In the banquet she gives to celebrate Hang's admission to university, her innate compassion and her graceful intelligence emerge as she tries to help one of the women who works for her by administering a subtle and witty putdown to the high village official oppressing this woman's family. Her love for Hang dilutes the bitterness she has nourished and gives meaning and purpose to her life.

Hang represents the future. While her mother and her aunt can never really transcend the past and are bound to it, Hang has a clear-

eyed gaze that enables her to see her mother and aunt's obsessions for what they are. She sees her mother's devotion to her uncle and his family as a form of enslavement and understands that her mother's self-sacrifice is a distorted kind of happiness: 'I realized she had a mission now, a new source of happiness.... How intoxicating it can be, self-sacrifice' (Duong 1994). What her mother totally lacks is the spirit of revolt. Hang calls it 'a kind of love — to revolt, the most essential force in human existence.... If only my mother could feel this revolt,...could gather a spark from this inferno' (Duong 1994).

Her view of her Aunt Tam is less harsh. In fact, she finds her admirable. When Hang sees her dealing with the women who work for and with her, she marvels: 'What force lay hidden in those frail shoulders of hers, what power inspired such trust in her words, such absolute obedience?' (Duong 1994). Yet, in a moment of insight, she realizes that her aunt and the village are one:

This woman, one of the only human beings dear to me, this silence, this loneliness, this backwardness were all one; she was my blood, my source, my mooring in this world. No one was closer to me; yet no one could have been stranger. It was through her that I knew the tenderness of this world, and through her too that I was linked to the chains of my past, to the pain of existence. Confusedly, as if through a fog, I saw a vision of my future. (Duong 1994)

But Hang chooses an alternative future. She firmly closes doors to the past in order to open a new one to what lies ahead. With her departure from Russia to attend to her aunt at her deathbed, she leaves behind her impoverished existence as a worker. Back in Hanoi, she has a loving reunion with her mother. But when she sees that her mother continues to be obsessed with Chinh, she leaves sooner than she had planned to: 'I should have stayed longer with her. Even a day more would have been enough. But as I closed the door behind me, I felt no remorse' (Duong 1994). In the village, she tends her aunt lovingly and when she dies, carefully observes all the burial ceremonies and traditions. But in spite of her aunt's injunction for her to stay 'under the roof of the ancestors', she decides otherwise:

Forgive me, my aunt: I'm going to sell this house and leave all this behind. We can honor the dead with a few flowers on a grave somewhere. I can't squander my life tending these faded flowers, these shadows, the legacy of past crimes. (Duong 1994)

Resolutely, she frees herself from the shackles of the past and empowers herself to follow her own dreams.

Duong Thu Huong, the novelist, speaks from within the Vietnamese experience. Herself a woman warrior, she participated in the war by leading a Communist youth brigade to the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel when she was only 20 years old. She was also active in the northern Vietnamese frontier when China attacked Vietnam in 1979. She has since been expelled from the party, however, and her books have been banned in Vietnam (Duong 1994). Yet we cannot discount her deep understanding, as seen in this novel, of the costs of the war to women who are caught between the burdens of a deeply traditional past and the chaotic socioeconomic realities of the present and what it takes to free oneself from this trap. This is evident in her protagonist, Hang, who embodies the spirit of revolt and the will to act.

PRAMOEDYA ANANTA TOER'S NOVELS:  
WOMEN SHOW THE WAY

IN the novels that comprise his *Buru* tetralogy,<sup>1</sup> controversial Ramon Magsaysay Award winner Pramoedya Ananta Toer dramatizes the importance of women in Indonesian history, particularly during the early period of national awakening from the late 1890s to the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The novels center on Minke, whose story is based on the life of Tirto Adi Suryo, the first native editor and publisher in Indonesian history.<sup>2</sup> The theme of the novels is Minke's coming of age and subsequent development as an Indonesian nationalist. Central to this development is the shaping and transforming influence of the women who touch his life. Yet these women are more than 'influences'; they lead lives of their own which become intertwined with Minke's as he struggles for justice and national consciousness. They are his 'unofficial teachers'; in many times of crisis, they show him the way.

Foremost among these women is Nyai Ontosoroh, the concubine of the Dutchman Herman Mellema, owner of *Boerderij Buitenzorg* (Dutch Agricultural Company). Minke meets Nyai when he is still a student at the HBS, an elite Dutch language school for the children of the Dutch and high-ranking Javanese, in Surabaya. He is immediately impressed by her charisma and the force of her personality as well as by her obvious accomplishments. Nyai speaks Dutch fluently; she is clearly mistress not only of her household but of the entire company which she manages, her husband having become an enervated alcoholic. He sees in her what a native could become even under the most adverse and oppressive conditions. In a world where women are entirely subservient, her father 'sold' her to Mellema at the age of 14 in exchange for a higher position as chief cashier at the sugar plantation where he worked. Yet she manages to educate herself, with the assistance of Mellema, and to learn management skills which she uses to expand the *Boerderij Buitenzorg* from its small beginnings into a large and prosperous concern.

Minke gets deeply involved in the life of Nyai Ontosoroh and her family when he falls in love with her daughter Annelies. When Herman Mellema is found dead of poisoning in a brothel which he frequents, Minke is questioned in court, particularly about his relationship with Annelies and is viciously and unfairly attacked in the newspapers. He is ready to sue his attackers, but is counselled by Nyai that a Native would never win in a European court; instead, 'Answer that article with another of your own. Challenge him with words' (Pramoedya 1981). This is a constant theme in Nyai's counsels to Minke: powerless as all Natives are under the Colonial government, words are the only and the most effective weapons they can use. She herself shows the way when she speaks up before the Court — in Dutch, even when told to speak in Malay as a reminder of her inferior status — and passionately questions the disparity in the treatment of Europeans and Natives. In spite of her eloquence, she and Minke fight a losing battle: to have his and Annelies' marriage recognized and to keep her from being sent to Holland. When Minke acknowledges defeat, she chides him: 'We fought back, Child, *Nyo*, as well and honorably as possible' (Pramoedya 1981).

Fighting back is important if one is to keep one's dignity and integrity in an unjust and oppressive system. Both as a woman in Javanese society and as a Native under the colonial powers, Nyai Ontosoroh is doubly powerless. But she empowers herself through education, arrived at through her own efforts, uses her capabilities to become a rich and successful businesswoman, and acquires the polished sophistication of a woman of the world. Immersed in problems that threaten everything she has built and worked for, including her own family, her understanding goes beyond her own difficulties, to that of her fellow Natives. In their fight before the European court of the Indies, she analyzes their situation:

... we, all of the Natives, are unable to hire attorneys. Even if we have money, it doesn't mean we are able to do so. The main reason is that we don't have the courage. And more generally still, we still haven't learnt anything. All their lives the Natives have suffered what we now are suffering. No one raises their voice — dumb like the river stones and mountains even if cut up and made into no matter what. What a roar there would be if they all spoke up as we will now speak out. Perhaps even the sky would be shattered because of the din. (Pramoedya 1981)

Embedded in this speech are two principles that guide Minke in his subsequent career as an Indonesian nationalist: one must break the silence wherever it exists, and even more important, the people must raise their voices in unity. And in fact, Nyai and Minke make a start. At the end of the second novel *Anak Semua Bangsa* (Child of all Nations, 1984), they gather their friends to join them in confronting Mauritz Mellema, the son of Herman Mellema by his European wife, whom they accuse of cruelly wrenching Annelies from the people and home she loved, neglecting to care for her properly until she finally dies. They hold him responsible for her death and expose his underlying motive: greed, the desire to take over the vast property and prosperous enterprise that had taken Nyai years of effort to build. In this informal 'court', Mellema is vanquished, rendered speechless and unable to defend himself. It is Minke who affirms their moral victory: 'we fought back, even though only with our mouths' (Pramoedya 1984).

Nyai Ontosoroh is presented, throughout all four novels, as Minke's 'spiritual mother'. But his real mother, though less visible in this account of Minke's life, is nonetheless an important influence. It is she who helps Minke come to terms with his being Javanese. Contemptuous of the petty corruption and desire for position which seem to him characteristic of Javanese culture, he would eschew it completely. Yet he has to contend with the fact that deep within him, he is immersed in the culture he was born into. In moments of crisis, his emotional reactions are Javanese and it is his mother and his mother's teachings which he invokes. It is she who tempers his contempt and shows him the noble face of Javanese culture. Gentle, soft-spoken, with a deep unconditional love for her son, she represents and tries to explain to him the best of Javanese values. She endeavors to give balance to his perspective, chiding him for having become a little brown Dutchman, in his utter contempt for these values. More important, however, she consistently affirms his freedom to be himself: 'You've discovered your own way. I will not obstruct you and will not call you back. Travel along the road you hold to be best' (Pramoedya 1981). She adjures him to be resolute and not to run from his own problems 'because to resolve them is your right as a man' (Pramoedya 1981).

Minke's mother is also concerned with language. She bewails his writing in Dutch: 'Why do you compose in a language your Mother cannot understand?' (Pramoedya 1981). Similarly, his journalist friends ask him to write in either Javanese or Malay and Nyai Ontosoroh adds her voice, telling him to write in Malay because the Malay papers are read by more people. He can thus enlist more sympathy for their cause, which is also the Natives' cause. To Minke, it is out of the question to write in Javanese. He feels that the rhythms of the Javanese language are inadequate to express the complexity of his thoughts and feelings. Even more, as he gets to know more about the life of the peasants, he realizes that the language, with its hierarchical structure, in fact contributes to their oppression by help-

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ing to enforce feudal subservience. But he eventually realizes the need to write in the language of the many as he goes on to become the editor of the first Malay-language newspaper circulated all over Java, the *Medan*.

In the third novel of the tetralogy, *Jejak Langkah* (Footsteps, 1990), Minke's formative years are largely over. He takes the only remaining step a Native can take to further his education, enlisting as student in the Medical School in Betawi (Jakarta). While here, he meets a young woman who profoundly affects his life. She is Ang San Mei, a member of the New Generation in China who are against Empress Ye Si's rule and are working for reform. Ang San Mei is in the Indies, along with others in the movement, to enlist support for their cause. Minke is attracted to her fragile beauty as well as to her determination and hard work as a propagandist and grassroots organizer. From their first meeting, she challenges his vague idealism; when he expresses his desire to be a 'free individual', and notes that it must be grounded in political activism: 'All of the educated Natives of Asia have a responsibility to awaken their peoples. If we don't, Europe will run riot throughout Asia.' She opens his eyes to the ill effects of European imperialism such as the opening up of the slave trade between Africa and America and impresses him with the necessity for organization. They soon get married and for five years, they live parallel lives, he following his medical studies and she immersed in her work. She is so immersed that, with her frail health, she succumbs to hepatitis and dies.

Minke is at a crossroads. Expelled from medical school for consistent infraction of its rigid rules, he considers various possibilities but continues to hear his late wife's voice urging him to start organizing: 'Are you going to let your people stay bent under the burden of their ignorance? Who will begin if you don't?' (Pramoedya 1990). Minke succeeds in his initial efforts to organize the government *priyayi* into the *Sarekat Priyayi*. As secretary of the organization, he publishes a weekly news magazine, the *Medan*. The first publication to be owned and run by Natives, it consists mainly of a compilation of laws and regulations in the Indies for their information. Nyai Ontosoroh challenges him to go beyond this by reminding him that more is needed: there have to be legal explanations so that the Natives will not be victimized as Minke

himself was once victimized. The *Medan* assumes a life of its own. It publishes cases of injustice among the natives, provides legal counsel through a lawyer; its reach extends to Borneo, Celebes and the Moluccas and natives write for help from all over the Indies. In the face of this success and in spite of the efforts of the colonial press to put obstacles in his way, Minke decides to make it a daily newspaper. On the other hand, the *Sarekat*, beset by corruption in the administration of finances, languishes.

At the peak of his career as a newspaperman and political activist, Minke heeds his mother's advice not to sing alone, to find someone to share his life and his concerns. He finds this in the Princess of Kasiruta, who is young, attractive, intelligent, and Dutch-educated. She helps him in his organizational work for a new *sarekat* with a broader base among the people. It is multi-ethnic, has Malay as an official language and is composed, not of government officials, but of traders, 'those who struggle for a livelihood independently — the free people'. She also edits a woman's magazine for his newspaper and their marriage prospers as a real partnership, based on comradeship in 'discussion and debate' and mutual love. As a wife, she is utterly loyal and fiercely protective.

But the Princess also has a life and causes of her own. Apart from the work she does for Minke's newspaper, she writes an article for a Dutch-language publication. Apparently dissatisfied that the *Medan* has not taken up the cause of the late Kartini who had been deceived by her husband, the Bupati of Rembang, she attacks him in her article. Minke tries to get her to acknowledge authorship (he inadvertently saw a draft of the paper under her pillow) but she pretends not to know what he is talking about. He says no more, acknowledging her right to privacy. What is even more amazing, he learns that his wife knows how to handle a gun and will not hesitate to use it to protect her husband. He has married a woman warrior, trained to be so by her father from the age of 10. This amazement turns to doubt when she guns down his would-be assassins, with no one finding out who did it. He knows that it comes out of her fierce protectiveness and deep concern for his safety, but he is deeply disturbed nonetheless. In the end, he resolves his doubts: 'I had to honor and respect her opinions and the way she viewed things' (Pramoedya 1990).

When veiled threats or physical assault fail to silence Minke, the government arrests him and sends him into exile. This happens at a time when the Princess is away on a visit to her father and only her maid, Piah, is in the house. But Minke is not taken away in ignominy; his spirits are lifted up when he takes leave of Piah and sees a dignity and sense of conviction that he is used to seeing only among women of a higher class and a higher education. Asked to swear that she will not leave the house until her mistress returns, she reproaches him 'in a very gentle voice but pregnant with protest: "How can you demand an oath from me, my master? An oath for my master, for my leader? Is it not enough that I am a member of the *Sarekat?*"' (Pramoedya 1990). He is moved to tears that Piah, a servant girl, should be only the second woman member among 50,000 men. She will accept no money; she asks him only for 'good words that I will remember all my life'. Sensing her absolute loyalty, he solemnly asks her to 'become a propagandist for the *Sarekat*, Call upon all women to join. Become their leader,' (Pramoedya 1990) to which she just as solemnly gives her promise. A fitting image, indeed, to bring with him into exile.

Unlike the first three novels in the tetralogy which are narrated by Minke himself, the fourth novel, *Rumah Kaca* (House of Glass, 1992), is seen from the point of view of Pangemanann, the Police Commissioner who arrests Minke. Intelligent, highly educated, from Native stock himself, Pangemanann has made it his lifetime career to study the life and writings of Minke and is in charge of government surveillance of his activities. He is responsible for the government's efforts to silence Minke, using threats, intrigue, hired assassins, whispering campaigns — all the tricks of the trade — to cut Minke down. When Minke emerges from exile, he continues to hound him, cutting off Minke's contact with any of his associates and followers so he cannot resume his political activism. It is thus that, not very long after his release, Minke dies — penniless, denied medical attention, with only one friend to bring him to his grave. Yet Pangemanann is a tortured and divided man. He admires Minke, considers him his 'teacher', and despises himself for selling his principles to further his career. At the same time, he takes a sadistic delight in foiling Minke at every turn and gloats at his triumphs over him.

The novel — and the series — ends when Nyai Ontosoroh, now living in France, comes to look for Minke, after learning that he has been released from exile. She is referred to Pangemanann who cringes before the silent force of her personality and experience:

This was the strong-willed person who had given up nationality, homeland and village and who had chosen foreign citizenship and had been able to put it to use in no less effective a way than those who had been born citizens. She had chosen freedom for herself. The law had stolen everything that she had built, but she had not lost anything, especially not her dignity. (Pramoedya 1992)

She sees into the truth and accuses him with just one quiet question: 'everything was your doing, wasn't it, Tuan?' before leaving him in disgust.

It seems fitting, within the logic of Minke's story, that the beloved mentor who has nurtured his spirit, constantly counselled and encouraged him in his career as well as served as an example and role-model in his fight for justice, should have the last word. Minke's story, however, is also the history of Indonesia at a crucial period, the emergence of Indonesian nationalism. This final scene then is more than a fitting conclusion to Minke's story; it is a final affirmation of what we consistently see throughout the tetralogy: that women as well as men are important players in Indonesia's awakening.

The texts discussed here exemplify the complex interplay between literature, history and the construction of women. Merlinda Bobis shows how a name constructs a woman's identity and can make a difference in a woman's visioning of herself and what she can be. Chiranan Pitpreecha and Duong Thu Huong, their lives and writings immersed in periods of conflict and struggle in the contemporary history of their respective countries, show what it means to be a woman and be a part in the struggle. Pramoedya Ananta Toer enables us to hear the significant voices of women in the national awakening of a people.

The song of the woman warrior is thus heard in many voices in the literature and history of the region. In recent history, more and more women in Southeast Asia and other Asian countries have empowered themselves to move beyond the private realm and take their place side

by side with men in the shaping of history: in governance and polity, in education, scholarship and the professions, in culture and the arts. They too are singing her song.

#### NOTES

1. So called because these stories were first told in Buru Island, where Pramoedya was exiled to his fellow prisoners. 'Told' because he was not allowed any writing materials during the first years of his imprisonment. It was not until 1975 that these novels were finally written.

2. The novels which comprise the tetralogy are: *Bumi Manusia* (This Earth of Mankind), *Anak Semua Bangsa* (Child of All Nations), *Jejak Langkah* (Footsteps) and *Rumah Kaca* (House of Glass). They have been translated into English by Max Lane. All page references are to the English translations

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