

Australian PEN – Keneally Award, 31 March 2005

Acceptance speech: Mr Joesoef Isak

Mr Brian Johns, publisher for Penguin in 1981 of *This Earth of Mankind*; Chair of CAL; Mr Chip Rolley, Chair, Writers in Prison Committee, Sydney PEN. Friends.

To PEN Australia, its most distinguished members and all its board members, I wish to convey my deepest thanks for this great honor which you and your association have bestowed upon me this day. For me, today is a special day- extremely special for numerous reasons.

I say special because this is my first visit to Australia, and it is indeed a great and beautiful surprise to be able to be amongst my colleagues, and amongst friends in Australia who are congenial in our shared work and ideals.

It is also very special as I have received this distinguished award from someone from far away whom I have long known of and admired: Australia's great author, Thomas Keneally. It is truly a great honor and joy that I am receiving the PEN Australia Award that bears his great name, what's more to receive it from his hands directly.

Please allow me to speak briefly about a past experience of mine. At the time that nearly all of the books we published were censored by a government led by generals, we consciously decided to publish a work of Thomas Keneally. There were two considerations as to why we did this: firstly he was a foreign writer- an Australian, and certainly not a communist. For that reason we guessed that surely he wouldn't be muzzled by those in power. Secondly, we hoped that the message conveyed in Thomas Keneally's book could be understood by those generals who were in power at that time. The book we chose was titled *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. All of you certainly know that the haunting tale of *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, in essence raises the issues of the individual right to freedom and the value of human dignity.

Indeed our guesses were correct, Thomas Keneally's book was not banned; however it seems that the message contained in the book did not seep into the hearts or

minds of the generals. It seems the freedom of the individual and human values were of no interest to the regime in power, for Hasta Mitra's books continued to be banned. Respected colleagues and guests, accepting the Australia PEN - Keneally Award is a great personal honor for me and my fellow founders of Hasta Mitra publishing, and I wish to accept this Award also with a feeling of gratitude towards those involved in my work. Here I must mention the young people and students who suffered more than five years imprisonment because they distributed our books; the street side book sellers who took the same risk as the large book stores distanced themselves from us, ex-political prisoners hawking our books door-to-door, and, last but not least, the housewives who through word of mouth became propagandists of our books which could not be distributed openly.

And I will never forget the contributions that two Australians in particular have made to my work: Max Lane and Brian Johns. These two Australians helped us break out of the isolation that the military regime was imposing upon us. Max Lane was the first person to translate Pramoedya Ananta Toer great literary work, the tetra logy that he wrote in prison camp on Buru Island. Brian Johns, heading up publishing for Penguin in the 1980s, was the person who brought these books to the English speaking readers throughout the world.

For me, an Award from Australia is deeply meaningful for two reasons. Firstly, this award inherently contains recognition that a vile black stain that affronted human values has marred Indonesian history over the last three decades there. However this award at the same time contains recognition that in the midst of those dark years where human rights and individual freedom were treated with contempt, a spirit of resistance arose. In my opinion this is an important issue to draw attention to, as what we refer to as the "free world" can quickly and sharply recognize dictators such as Pol Pot and Sadam Husein, yet at the same time consider other dictators such as General Suharto and General Pinochet to be friends of democracy. I consider the Australia - PEN Thomas Keneally Award to be correcting this error.

Finally I wish to convey the experience of working under a repressive military regime, which I can briefly summarize in the following terms: individual rights, the freedom of expression, press freedom and the freedom to publish books are values which must be fought for and upheld by us ourselves. Do not hope that democratic values can be brought about by authoritarian rulers.

Defending truth and justice constitutes a long struggle, because we can not possibly achieve a fast and immediate result. Victory in the struggle for democratic rights is something we will only achieve - and I repeat only - if we do not relent in resisting oppression and injustice. If we cease to resist, with the excuse of fear, fatigue or despair, this will only make those authoritarians in power very happy. But it precisely these three attitudes that we have refused to show to them.

The solidarity of like minded colleagues, such as those of you present this evening, has most certainly helped drive our enthusiasm and strengthened the vanguard that struggles for democracy.