

## TRANSLATING MOCHTAR LUBIS'S SHORT STORY "KULI KONTRAK" INTO ENGLISH: A NOVICE TRANSLATOR'S AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 03-10-2021 Accepted: 15-10-2021 Published: 30-10-2021 Volume: 5 Issue: 2 DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.33019/lire.v5i2.133">https://doi.org/10.33019/lire.v5i2.133</a>	This article is of reflection category exploring the common mistakes often occur in translating Indonesian literary texts into English by a non-native speaker of English. It argues that translation of literary texts is meticulous as it should involve interpretation and fluency in both source and target languages as well as creativity in order that the translated texts communicate equally well. It is the communicative power of translation that makes this undertaking of language transfer miraculous. Applying sufficient principles in translation and creative writing method, this article exemplifies the translation process of Mochtar Lubis's short story "Kuli Kontrak" into "The Contract Coolies" that appears in the Your Story page of California-based Dalang Publishing bi-lingual website. Autoethnography is the method used in reporting the results. Three main problems that ensue in the Indonesian-English translation of this short story include (1) the concept of time, (2) the non-idiomatic use of body-parts, and (3) the unnecessary use of object construction/ passive voice that often do not translate well in English. By tackling these problems, the English reader may hopefully obtain the meaning-message of the short story as closely as possible to that acquired by Indonesian readers.
<b>KEYWORDS</b>  <i>Communication</i> <i>Creativity</i> <i>Interpretation</i> <i>Literary translation</i>	

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A large corpus of research on literary translation from Indonesian into English indicates that employment of various translation strategies has to be done to achieve satisfactory results (e.g., Putranti, 2015; Kaparang & Putranti, 2017; Saleh & Weda, 2018; Tirtayasa & Setiajidi, 2018). Indeed, foundations of translation studies had been firmly laid by Eugene Nida, Peter Newmark, John Catford, and Mildred Larson before the more recent theorists like Jeremy Munday, Mona Baker, and André Lefevere developed the theories further. Speaking of literal translation, Putranti (2015) argues that synonymy is helpful, given the different idiomatic expressions found in English and Indonesia. According to Kaparang & Putranti (2017), the Newmarkian strategy of communicative translation is useful in translating metaphors in Indonesian novels into English. Given the figurative language in such literary texts as poems, English translation of Indonesian poetry often semantically and lexically flawed (Saleh & Weda, 2018). Challenging Catfordian



linguistic theory of shift at the micro-level, Tirtayasa & Setiajid (2018) claim that attentions to pragmatic and stylistic is crucial in poem translation. They consolidate their claim by examining a contextually rich Indonesian poem with layered meanings.

In the meantime, it is hard to ignore the fact that East-West power-relations and the hegemony of English as global language have often made translation an asymmetrical cultural exchange. The translation of literary works into English tends to ignore such minor languages like Indonesian. It is not wrong to assert that literary translation is rife with competing ideologies. Consequently, the translations of literature in minor languages are mostly done from English. For example, Korean literature are available for Indonesian readers after they are translated into English. Examining the politeness strategy in the translation of an Indonesian novel, Darta (2018) also reveals its power-relations.

Undoubtedly, the numerous studies on translation above help Indonesian translators to improve the quality of their translation products. Studies that specifically observe translation of Indonesian literature into English are abound, but the reverse is not true. To mention some, Wiles (2019) examines the translation of words for swearing in cursing in Indonesian novels into English. Earlier, Jayantini investigates the translation of concessive clauses in one of Fira Basuki's novels (2011). While the study of Hilman (2015) focuses on the translation of the novel Saman into English, problems in translating Indonesian poetry are examined by Saleh & Weda (2018). Little, however, has been said about the difficulties in translating Indonesian literature into English by non-native speakers of English. Neither do the existing studies discuss the impacts it has to the position of Indonesian literature in the global literature constellation when most of the translation of Indonesian literature are done by non-Indonesians.

Next, communication among people from the same language background is less complicated than that of interlingual communication. Verbal communication is the essence of translation. Considering nation borders as opportunities rather than constraints, translation must comply with first, recognition of the global context; secondly, values and perspectives exchanges, and lastly, articulacy in cross-cultural understanding. Translation is not a secondary process of transporting ideas across borders, since it continually involves cultural exchanges. Translation is thus an interdisciplinary, interlingual, and intercultural activity that serves as a negotiation channel



to maintain distinct national identities in global cultural context (Dewi, 2018). Neither is translation seen as secondary or inferior compared to the original text. Transnational, transcultural, and translingual interactions that enrich each other's language and culture take place in translation (Kiernan, et al., 2016). In this globalized world of today, more people from different nationalities have to communicate with which translation becomes increasingly more important to improve communication. Translation as communication is thus meticulous. Following Ricouer (2004), translation is an act of intercultural communication aimed at the target language users.

With this in mind, this present article is to scrutinize the issue more closely through the practice of translating an Indonesian short story into English by an Indonesian novice translator. The advantages and limitations out of her experience in translating works into a language that does not belong to her maybe useful for fellow Indonesian translators.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Literary translation is to reconcile the need to stay faithful to the original work and to create an artistic, unique, and distinctive piece of work. Translation of literary texts should evoke the same feelings and responses as the original. Mindful of the functional-communicative paradigm in translation (e.g., Dangin et al., 2016), good literary translation is thus an acceptable translation. Although meaning is of utmost importance in literary translation, aesthetic aspects is likewise essential. Aesthetic breadth in translation is thus hard to ignore. Like literature, fine arts, requires special treatments. A recent study on translation of fine art terms found in Kun Adnyana's painting catalog, for example, reveals the linguistic phenomena that necessitate the combination of varied translation procedures so that some specific terms can be translated accurately, readably, and naturally (Umbas & Jayantini, 2021).

Translation of literary texts belongs to the first translation category (interpreting) – the other two beings technical and commercial/business translation (Samuelsson-Brown, 2010). Literary translation is a precise, careful, and thoughtful reading which is perfected with an equally precise, careful, and thoughtful (re)writing of the literary work. Literary translation, unlike other technical writing, undertakes higher levels of communicative and aesthetic purposes. Interpretive



translation demands a sense of language, cultural knowledge about the translation subjects, an understanding of a similar or comparable works, and creative writing skills.

Samuelsson-Brown's list of requirements for a literary translator is based on the Translators Associations of the Society of Authors (2010, pp. 5-6). The list consists of five practicalities as follows. Passion is the first requirement in producing a translated piece that reads well. A translator should have a feeling for the language and be fascinated with it. Familiarity with works by the author being translated is the second requirement. Thirdly, the translator should be able to move from style to style when translating different works. Fourthly, aiming at the original work's meaning is more important than the accurate rendering of words for words. The fifth requirement is that the translator should echo the tone and style of the original work.

Here, Samuelsson-Brown's five requirements are pertinent in literary translation, especially the third requirement that entails aesthetic implications. To emphasize, "the translator must be a skilled and creative writer in the target language and nearly always will be a native speaker of it." (Samuelsson-Brown, 2010, p. 5). Here, word-for-word translation does not usually apply to literary texts. While the translation of academic texts uses a lot of foreignization or assimilation techniques, Apriyanti et al. (2016) concur that the translation of Indonesian literary texts makes use of distinguishing markers such as capitalization or italics, especially for cultural terms untranslatable into English.

As it is, literary translation commonly employs the foreignization-domestication dynamics. The process is known as "sending readers abroad" vis-à-vis "bringing authors home" (Venuti, 1994, p. 85). Foreignization refers to the technique of preserving the distinctiveness of the original cultures (e.g., persons' names, homegrown cuisine, historical figures, street names or local institutions). On the contrary, domestication is a free translation style to minimize the strangeness of foreign texts within target language. Jayantini (2017) argues that both domestication (target culture-oriented translation) and foreignization (source culture-oriented translation) have their own respective characteristics that can be either advantageous or disadvantageous. Making use of both strategies, it is prioritizing the communicative function of language that becomes the philosophical foundation of this present article.



### 3. METHODOLOGY

The study that becomes the basis of this article is qualitative using Autoethnography as an approach. Here, the researcher is reporting her own praxis by making use of tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write the autoethnography of translating an Indonesian text into English. Unlike conventional approach of doing research and representing others, autoethnography treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act (Ellis et al., 2011; Wall, 2006). This method is chosen because translation involves negotiation to maintain one's own distinct national identities in global cultural context. One distinct feature of autoethnography is the dynamic of process and product. The data collection, reflective journal writing, interviews, fieldnotes, and storytelling of every single event make up the process, while the writing of the stories is the product. The researcher is to narrate the translating process from the beginning to its end in detail, just like a story. By making personal experience meaningful and cultural experience engaging, it allows personal and social change possible. In so doing, this study applies somatic and affective field experience inquiry (Hokkanen, 2017) and reflexivity (Brännlund et al., 2013). Hopefully, future translators will brave the trade which is now dominated by the English-speaking translators.

The translated text is “Kuli Kontrak”, a short story written by Mochtar Lubis in 1959. It is a story that involves a Dutch opzichter, plantation supervisor, and his assailants, i.e., the indigenous contract coolies in Kerinci Regency, Jambi Province, West Sumatra during the colonial period. It is important to know the context of the story. It is set in colonial time when Dutch officials habitually exercised their power to the natives. In Lubis's story, the coolies were angry because the opzichter had sexually harassed their wives. The coolies rushed to stab him. The storyteller's father was a civil servant who was assigned to arrest the three coolies. The three coolies were then sentenced to flogging. The storyteller boy secretly watched this act of violence from the top of a tree that grew behind the prison walls. Retold briefly, the synopsis of this story is meant to ease the discussion. Translating the short story is, unquestionably, interpreting and rewriting it creatively for the target readers. The English version of the above story “The Contract Coolies” by the Indonesian translator is published by the California-based Dalang Publishing LLC. on the Your Story page of their bi-lingual website, [www.dalangpublishing.com](http://www.dalangpublishing.com).



#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What follows is a brief look at the meticulous and the miraculous experienced by the translator in grappling with her first literary translation attempt. To ease the discussion, continues numbering is provided for each set of data. The first datum is the Source Text. The second datum is the first translation attempt, that is, a word-for-word translation from the Indonesian translator. The third datum is a revised version after the consultation with the Dalang Editor. The fourth datum is the final translation suggested by the American proofreader.

*The first lesson-learned:* people of different cultures view time differently. Translating time from Indonesian into English is not simple for a newbie as shown below.

- (1) Ayah tiba ketika hari telah malam dan kami semua telah disuruh tidur. Aku dengar ayah bercakap-cakap dengan ibu sampai jauh malam dan kemudian rumah pun sunyilah.
- (2) Father arrived when it was late at night, and we were all already told to sleep. I heard that my father conversed with my mother till very late at night and then the house was quiet.
- (3) Father arrived late at night, after all of us had been told to go to sleep. I heard my father and my mother talking till deep into the night and then the house was quiet.
- (4) Ayah arrived late that night, after we children had been told to go to sleep. I heard him and my mother talking deep into the night, and then the house was quiet.

Here, order of time is problematic to the translator, in this case, the translation of the word “telah” (1) into “already” (2). Indonesians are often unaware that the usage of past perfect and pluperfect tenses can solve the problem of clarifying the time sequence between two past events that happened one after another. It would seem that in Indonesian context the word “telah” explains everything regardless of the event (s) and the corresponding time sequence. As shown in (3), the translation uses the past perfect for something that started in the past (“children had been told to sleep”) and continued up to a given time in the past (“Father arrived late at night”). The next sentence, again, shows the narrator’s lack of idiomatic expressions when resolving to “till very late at night” for “sampai jauh malam” (3). The assigned American editor later revised the expression into “till deep into the night” (4) to sound “more American”.



Note must be taken here in passing about cultural terms. The translated text uses the borrowing technique for the cultural term that means “father” in English. The word “Ayah” in (4) is left untranslated to give local flavor to the target text. The borrowed word is written in italics when appears for the first time. Subsequently, the English translation applies foreignization to all personal pronoun referring to “father” throughout the text. The word “pelesit” (local ethereal character) and “opzichter” (Dutch plantation supervisor) are the other two words that remain as they are in the English version of the story. Translation is essentially the equivalent representation of stylistics, references, and linguistic features in both the source language and the target language. In literary translation, culturally distinctive terms like “pelesit” and mechanical matters such as kinship addressing can be measured by means of its content analysis, type text (grammatical and lexical), and theoretical foundation (Tanuwijaya et al., 2016). Among the theoretical foundation is comprehension of the local culture. The present article, however, does not discuss this translation of cultural term at length. Instead, it now turns to the next translation issue that is quite problematic to the translator.

*The second lesson-learned* is idiom. Indonesian idiom versus English is meticulously puzzling. In Indonesian it seems normal to mention body parts in action, for example “Kakinya berjalan pelan-pelan”. The English translation of it leaves out the obvious body part: “He walks slowly.” Just as he can use only his feet to walk, what else can someone use except for her/his ears to hear? Thus, the expression “Telinganya mendengar angin berlalu” is simply translated into “He hears the wind pass”. It is incorrect to say “His ears hear the wind pass.” The following example clarifies the novice translator’s difficulty.

- (5) Baru seminggu yang lalu ayah pergi ke Sungai Deras menghentikan perang semacam ini dan dia kena peluru batu kesar yang merenggutkan topi helmnya dari kepalanya.
- (6) Just a week ago my father went to the Deras River to stop this kind of war, and a stray stone bullet hit him snatching the helmet hat from his head.
- (7) Just a week ago when my father went to the Deras River to stop this kind of war, a stray stone bullet scraped his helmet.



- (8) Just a week ago, when my father went to the Deras River to stop a war there, a stray stone hit his helmet.

Here we see that a helmet is a metal hat therefore worn on the head. Where else do we wear a helmet? Saying “helmet hat” (6) is therefore unidiomatic in English. The removal of “hat” and “from his head” in (7) makes the translation familiar to English ears. More words disappear in (8) and “hit”, instead of “scraped”, collocates better with “stone” (9). The repeated sound of the first letter “s” in both words make it more poetic. Here, creativity and artistry as in the use of, in this case, alliteration is important in literary translation.

Next is another example of the frequent appearance of body part and figurative language used commonly in Indonesian that do not translate well in English.

- (9) Kecut hatiku mendengar cerita ibu. Rasanya badanku dingin menggigil. Dan setelah masuk kamar tidur, amat lama baru aku bisa tidur.
- (10) I was sad to hear my mother’s story. It felt like my body was shivering. And upon entering the bedroom, I was unable to sleep until quite some time.
- (11) I was saddened by my mother’s story. Shivering, I went to my bedroom. For quite some time, I was unable to sleep.
- (12) I was saddened to hear this. Shivering, I went to my bedroom. For quite some time, I couldn’t sleep.

First of all, saying “my body was shivering” is not idiomatic (10). “I am shivering” is the correct expression. Indeed, Indonesians tend to say “gigi saya sakit” rather than “saya sakit gigi”. Removal of the body part is needed in the English version. Besides, data (10) is strange to English readers because of its concessive clauses and double conjunction “and upon”. Indonesian concessive clauses are not translated into English concessive clauses (Jayantini, 2017). Reordering of the subsequent sentences is therefore necessary to show the logical time sequence as in (11). The American proofreader sophisticated the translation (12). The novice translator came to learn that mentioning body part is common in Indonesian, but it has to be removed in English. Here again the untrained Indonesian translator must learn and unlearn about omission of body parts in English.

*The last lesson learned* is translation of Indonesian passive voice. Jayantini (2017) is of the view that passive voice or object construction is common in Indonesian vis-à-vis the active



construction in English because Indonesians are culturally more interested in the result of the action. Shifts of active and passive voices take place in translating “Kuli Kontrak” as follows.

- (13) *Pikiranku terganggu mendengar kuli-kuli kontrak yang akan dilecuti esok pagi di penjara.*
- (14) *My mind was disturbed to hear the contract coolies who would be stripped tomorrow morning in prison.*
- (15) *Hearing that the contract coolies would be flogged tomorrow morning made me toss around.*
- (16) *Hearing that the contract coolies would be flogged the next morning made me toss and turn.*

Translating “*pikiranku terganggu*” into “*my mind was disturbed*” is not only unidiomatic (14), but also reducing the drama. Criticizing Lubis’ style, the Dalang editor had a preference for the so-called “*writing hot scene cold*”. The lashing of the coolies is brutal, hence its impact on one’s mind must have been devastating. The narrator must have had such mixed feelings as inquisitive, fear, sad, angry, etc. The words “*toss around*” (15) is the solution. They are later made more polished with “*toss and turn*” (16). By activating the sentence, the narration becomes more natural. Having taken it out of the telling mode, the narrator put the character “*on stage*”. As further argued by Jayantini et al. (2021) translation of passive forms requires lexical, grammatical, textual, and contextual interpretation to give natural expressions in target language. Here, it is the translator’s job to make necessary conversions. Indeed, the function of a translation is to present something foreign accurately and as palatable as possible to evoke interest and perhaps compassion. This is to say that the translation product follows Ricouer’s notion of the communicative function and reader-oriented philosophy of translation (2004).

This article would argue that literary translation is even more meticulous yet miraculous. Just as we need interpretive skills to reveal such things as paradoxes and tensions often engrained in literature, the translation of literary texts requires interpretations. As such, a skillful literary translator needs to (re)write across different creative styles. Unspeakable delight, if not to say miracle, happens when this cultural-lingual exchange results in better understanding of not only one’s own culture but also that of others.



To conclude, despite the mindless mistakes encountered, the beginner translator here obtained valuable lessons. Translation allows us to have a better sense of both SL and TL when presenting time or place and action in logical order of happening. It improves our knowledge of idiomatic expressions that are equivalent and acceptable in both languages. An intimate knowledge of the source language and of the regional culture and literature as well as reasonable knowledge of subjects dealt with are important for the translator. Translation involves a great deal of decision making. Correct decision making makes us see more clearly, think more wisely, and appreciate each other's culture even better. Though full of twists and turns, translating a literary text is a miracle for any language enthusiast.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This article has shown that translation of literary texts is both painstaking and rewarding. It has illustrated the meticulousness of translating an Indonesian short story titled "Kuli Kontrak" into English "The Contract Coolies". Given that Indonesian translator is often less valued than the native speaker of English when translating Indonesian texts into English, this article has attempted to uncover the experience of the researcher-and-novice-translator in the endeavor. Three main difficulties that she encounters include the use of idiom, body parts, and passive voice in translating the text into the target language. Once these weaknesses are identified, future Indonesian translators may improve their translation quality when translating for English readers. Non-English-speaking translators can thus sit on par with their fellow native-speakers of English when translating Indonesian texts into English.

To highlight the power-relation, it is best to end this article by quoting from "The Paper Menagerie", a short story by Ken Liu, an American epic fantasy writer and translator of Chinese fiction into English. He says, "Every act of communication is a miracle of translation." The character in the short story is Jack, a Chinese American who had been discriminated against in his young age when staying in a xenophobic neighborhood. Despite his fluent English, Jack grew uncomfortable and ashamed of his maternal Chinese ancestry. Breakdown of communication occurred at home where his mother spoke little English. Being relocated to America as a mail-order bride from China, Jack's mother had tried hard to learn English to communicate with her



son who barely knew a word of Chinese. It was not until Jack discovered a shoe box his mother had left him before she died that he regretted the long years of mother-son miscommunication. The shoe box contained his favorite childhood toy, i.e., a paper tiger, and his mother's letter written in Chinese. He asked someone to translate the letter that was replete with the word "ai" meaning love. Now that he learned about the sufferings that his mother had to endure in order to win her son's love and affection, Jack was no longer ashamed of his Chinese background and started to learn Chinese. This story illustrates the miracle of translation in bridging the communication gaps. It is worth noting that Ken Liu's own modern conception of translation is a performance in cultural negotiation which he applies in translating classic Chinese epics into Western genre, hence transposing a foundational narrative from one culture into another.

With that being said, translation is a powerful practice in assisting source language readers (and/or) translators to appreciate more about home culture now accessible worldwide by means of translation. Intended as reflective notes from the translator of Mochtar Lubis's short story, this article concurs that the knowledge, awareness, and sense of language gained throughout the translation process is but a miracle. Translation allows such pride of local and national language, literature, and culture to travel across the globe. It is meticulous yet miraculous.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author thanks the Centre of Research and Community Outreach of Sanata Dharma University (LPPM USD) for the support of this research. Expression of gratitude also goes to the editors of LiRe Journal and the anonymous reviewers for their kind assistance and constructive comments.

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