

MALAY LITERATURE: TRANSLATED OR NOT TO BE TRANSLATED

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Abstract

In Asian literature, Malaysia is categorized as the minority for its literature. Its development in literary realm has just built for some decades. It is not like the other big countries, such as China, Japan, and many other Southeast Asia which have been famous for its literature in world. Having no difference with other literature, Malay literature is developed through translation. Since English is still the main language in world literature, Malay literature has to consider its literature to be translated in English too. Meanwhile, modern Malay literature has presented already the novels in form of English language verse. Many novelists have tendency to write directly in English rather than presenting their works in vernacular language (Malay language). Translation, specifically in English, does not play important role in Malay literature. Malay English novels can assist the circulation of Malay Literature around the world, yet it may also reduce the appreciation for Malay language itself. This paper aims to discuss Malay literature dilemma in using English as the vernacular language in novels or using English as the bridge for bringing Malay culture into World Literature.

Keywords: English Translation novels, Malay literature, vernacular language, translation, World Literature

INTRODUCTION

As lingua franca, English is not only used for the direct communication only. In literature, as it is defined as the written and printed text, English also has the important role. The role of English in literature can be seen from its emergences in many literary works. As the international language, English is commonly used and understood by many people. In the relation to literature, English appears as the common language used by many writers in their writing. Besides the using of English in direct writing, English is also used as the tools for translating many minor literary works. Minor literary works which are written in certain vernacular language can be read by readers from all over the world by the use of English language. The translation of literary works through English as the common language; therefore some other languages such as French and Spanish are used also for translation verse, can help the circulation for minor literature to get acknowledgement and wider readers globally. However, In Malay literature, there is the decline in English translation novels and many of Malay writers

have tendency to write in English or in other words it can be said that English has become the vernacular language in recent Malay literature.

Translation, especially in English language, has been the important key to spread literary works globally. It is by a reason for the translation to produce the second text in using English. The common reason is that the language is mastered globally. However, English is not simply a default language used in communication. It is used as global language because it is culturally regarded as the appropriate language for certain communicative context.¹ Thus, the use of English is seen to have specific purpose whether to deliver daily conversation, build business or even to present certain custom and value to others. It is in literature where English is used as the media to introduce and even transfer the value.

However, the use of English as common second language has brought dilemma through the development of vernacular language. Global trends influence

people mindset to pick and use English more than their vernacular one. The demand for the globalization has contributed the rapid development of English, as it is proposed by Well:

One of the anticipated achievements of the twenty first century was the rapid diffusion of Basic English as lingua franca of the world and even more rapid modification, expansion and spread of English in its wake...It was made the official medium of communication throughout the world by the Air and Sea control, and by 2020 there was hardly anyone in the world who could not talk and understand it.²

So, it cannot be denied that people will be accustomed to live with English as the language in communication. Thus, in Malay literature also this condition happens while English is even used greatly as the unity for multicultural society. The modern writers directly put English into their writings so other people from other countries that live in Malay can understand and enjoy their writing.

In Malaysia, English has become the second language used in society. It appears in many aspects such as education, government, daily used and also in literature. The use of English in Malay literature is begun in 1940. For the first time, Malay literature uses its vernacular language in literary works. Malayan language is still the common language used by writers in early period. Most of the stories of old period is told and retold by the tale-tellers. The classic Malay literature has a lack of translation because there is the limitation of English words in translating certain Malay language, such as *maka*, *hatta*, etc. As the translation has close relation to fidelity, this classic Malay literature remains untranslated. This case happens in the old period where the translation is still regarded as the representative of the original which may appear as the literally translation or word by word translation. This condition relates to the

reason for the lack of translated text, as stated by G. C Kalmann:

the lack of translation may be a significant absence. It may be asked why this or that work is not translated; is it just ignored, or are there specific reasons'' The reasons may be of an ideological, political, linguistic or some other nature. Sometimes it is argued, for instance, that certain texts are 'untranslatable'. It may be assumed that there are certain conventions specific to a given period and a given community which govern those judgments.³

Classical Malay literature is stated as the untranslatable one for linguistic reason. The limited diction of English words has made classic Malay literature belongs to the national literature only, never be known in global context.

In time, English language has developed widely in Malaysia. As the second language, schools use English as communication tools. The development of this English has effect to the emergence of many writers who have good skill in English writing. The use of English continuity has made many writers to be accustomed to the pattern of English language. It is not like the classic period where there is still limitation in mastering the grammar of English language. Malay writers and authors even produce their literary works, such novels and short stories, directly in English language. Thus, the term for Malay English novels has come to the surface.

The emergences of Malay English novels indirectly replace the position of translation. The ability of Malay authors to write their works in English has made them to use English as the vernacular language in the novels. The emergences of this writer can influence the development of national literature. However, writing which is written in English will indirectly be seen as the product of international literature. While the readers find a novel with the English title, the novel

will be regarded as western product. Readers will have less attention to the background of the value which is stated in the novel. Therefore, in translation, the works primarily belongs to national literature first. It enriches the national literature from two sides, from becoming the national treasure with its vernacular language and becoming the treasures for world literature for its translation form. Thus, the dilemma happens in Malay literature in which the increasing of Malay English novels defeat the translation text which may be defined as the decline of Malay national literature.

An Overview to the Development of English Language in Traditional Malay Literature

The development of Malay literature is influenced much by the adaptation and translation. For the traditional Malay literature, it is influenced by the Indian culture and also Sufi. The assimilation of two cultures in literary realm is important to determine Malay national literature. India does not only bring the influence for the adaptation but also in form of translated works into Malay language. Thus, this kind of translation from other languages into Malay will sign the existence of Malay national literature. Besides that, the role of colonialism also assists the translation of traditional Malay literature. Therefore, the translation of traditional Malay literature has not been famous yet. There are actually many valuable discussions for the development of Malay literature. National Malay literature has variety in its forms and also themes. The entering of other cultures also contributes the development of Malay literature. Meanwhile, some problems and issues behind the translation process impact the declining of translation toward national Malay literature. Thus, the translation is no longer regarded as the tools for circulating national literature.

Furthermore, English language has also entered Malaysia since 19th century. It is started by the coming of British Empire who is in the business for looking gold, glory and gospel to the Southeast Asia, including Malaysia. This condition then influences the development of English as the second language in Malaysia. In literature, English also takes a part in which some old traditional

Malay literature is translated into English. So far, traditional Malay literature has less translation form. Yet, this does not decline the acknowledgement of Malay literature, especially among the Southeast Asia. As a part of Malayan, Malay literature takes important part in introducing the Malayan culture. The influence of Indian and Persian culture has constructed the literary form of traditional Malay literature, and English language is used as one tools for assisting the recognition of the works. The following discussion will be shown the development of traditional Malay literature and how far English is taken into the tools in translation.

The Emergence of Early Translation in Malay Literature

English is the first language used in translation of Malay literature. It is started by the coming of colonialism in 19th century. British Empire builds their governance in Malaysia. The increase of government service, trading and commerce, have made English to be used as the common language between British and Malay. British also introduce English through education. Around that time, school is not only available in vernacular language, but also in English. The teacher and student will use English as the main language. This kind of school has prestigious position because the students can be considered to get position in important civil service posts in the government if they get good level in mastering English at school.⁴ However, not all of the citizen can join British school because it is located in town and it has high tuition fees. This may be one reference for the case of lack translation of traditional literature since the use of English at that time is for the capitalist reason, to provide education and take the students as a part of colonial family. There will be no attention to the literature because it may be seen as less important to the development of British Empire. The focus for trading and finding gold and glory has made literature become minority.

Moreover, the independence of Malaysia has contributed the spread of

English in many sectors of life. There is significant condition where English is spread through the role of mass media. The development of modern era also provides advanced tools, such as television, theatre and radio to perform English as the language used in every performance. According to the Platt and Weber's argument, the trend wave of English films is the crucial factor to determine the spread of English language in Malaysia.⁵ People in Malaysia get many chances to pick the language through the English movie and use it in daily use. This trend may determine the tendency for many writers to use English as the vernacular language in writing since it has adhered to their culture and custom.

In Malaysia, the use of English has variation domain; whether in law, education, tourism, business and also translation. English becomes second language used since Malaysia has multicultural society. There are many immigrants from Asean country, such as Thailand, Philippines, Bangladesh, Myanmar, etc. For this multiethnic variation, English is chosen as the bridge for communication. It is also in case of English as the international language understood by many countries. English is used to spread information, knowledge and variety of messages into the public. Thus, the use of English becomes crucial in Malay society.

In literature, English also takes a role. However, the use of English in early literature has contrast to the expectation that it will be used to translate Malay texts into English, so Malay literature can be recognized in other regions. In fact, the ability in using English is used by many translators to translate many English texts into Malay language. The scholars, students, and also translators who possess good ability in English have tendency to translate English novel into their vernacular language that is Malay language. This is quite miserable because it does not open the gate for the emergences of original Malay texts. The translated text from English into Malay is more to the adaptation process. It may enrich literary works, add many kinds of Malay stories, but it cannot present the original culture and idea from the native of

Malay. These translated texts are not only produced by Malay people, but also by the Western. The English novels that are translated into Malay by Dutch translator are *Robinson Crusoe (Hikajat Robinson Crusoe(1875))* and *Sindbad (1876)*. There is such kind of trust from Malay people to allow English texts to be translated and adapted into their literature. There are many other languages or literature that can be used as the translated one, such as Chinese texts which may also comes to Malay from the influence of its neighborhood, Singapore. However, English texts are still the main choice. According to Tzu You, the best translation from Western into Malay compared to Chinese into Malay is caused by the very talented translators who learn Western education directly.⁶ So, English language really constructs people's perspective to see it as the important and worthy language.

Early Malay Literature in English Translation Verse

Early and traditional Malay literature both come to the two forms, oral and written text. In the form of oral literature, the story is about fable and also fairy tale. In written literature, Malay performs many hikayat, syair, pantun, and songs. The theme and content derive from Sufism and Indian impact, yet Malay still keeps their culture inside. The translation from earlier Malay literature is less found and published in common. It remains as the national literary text which may be used in certain condition, for instance in form of literature research. It is not like other traditional literature which is published nationally and even globally, such as *The Tale of Genji*, *Gilgamesh*, *Shakespeare*, etc. Syair, hikayat, pantun and songs in Malay literature have unique form and lines. This can be one reason for the translators to have some difficulties to do the translation for Malay writings. Moreover, the translation verse that is produced for Malay out looked is quite difficult to be done. The diction of English words that describes the originality of Malaysia is seen as the significant point in the earlier literature. For

instance, the sentences “Antara Laut Pantai Remis, Pasir-nya bagai santan di-ramas” (this is 18th century Perak court poet’s vignettes of coastal bays) is translated into “The sands at Cockle-shell Strand were white as milk squeezed from a coconut”.⁷ The delineation of sands which is as white as coconut milk is regarded less poetical. Therefore, this closely relates to Malay outlook of nature, the coconut trees along the shore. It is more cultural to define sand as white as coconut milk rather than using the word of snow or swan. For this certain diction, it determines the less translation of traditional Malay literature. The original culture and nature of Malaysia are seemingly important in order to present Malay literature as the representative of Malay tradition and value.

So, translation process in Malay literature has actually begun for long time ago. Therefore, in the traditional writing, translation is still focused on the diction that represents the nature of Malay culture. This can be such kind of inhibitor from the translator to do translation. It is in sorrowful condition then while translator is brave to translate English into Malay language. This is the dilemma in which Malay literature has rich literary works; it comes mostly from adaptation process and is circulated nationally, rather than having their original works to be translated and recognized globally.

Translation in Modern Malay Literature

Translation texts from Malay into English start to develop seriously in modern Malay literature. Some of Malay writers have written their works in Malay, shown the modern style of Malay literature. The writers such as Abdullah Abdul Kadir, Abdullah Hussain, and Fatimah Busu are the famous writers from Malay. Hussain ever got South East Asian (SEA) Write Award for his writings. Therefore, the writings of those famous writers have not been translated into English. They are circulated as the national literature only. This is very sorrowful indeed because most of them are being famous in presenting Malay culture, criticize Malay government, and raise the issue in Malay tradition. Abdullah Abdul Kadir (Munshi

Abdullah) is recognized as the father of modern Malay literature. He is regarded as the most cultured Malay and the innovator of Malay letter. The most important work from Abdullah is *Hikayat Abdullah* (1849), *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah ke Kelantan*, and *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah ke Mekkah* (1854). *Hikayat Abdullah* is a kind of simple writing and it also presents the contemporary style. The story is about the autobiography of Abdullah and absolutely performs the language that relates to the daily use or the common diction. The story is more realistic too. That is why Abdullah is regarded as the inventor of modern Malay literature. Some Abdullah's works are translated into English by many translators, such as Rev. B. P. Keasberry 'The Journal of a Voyage from Singapore to Kelantan' (included in Vol. I: 1 of the Journal of Eastern Asia in 1875), J. T. Thompson's Translations from the *Hikayat Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, Munshi* (published in 1874 in London). Abdullah Hussain is also recognized as the best writer of Malay. He was awarded many times for his contribution in writing. Some of his famous writings are *Binti Penghulu*, *Harta dan Jodoh Menanti di England*, *Kasih Isteri*, and *Dia...Kekasihku*. These writings are published in 'Sahabat' magazine. Fatimah Busu, as the woman writer also gets recognition for her fiction writing. She is the leader of the Malay fiction writings. She writes many short stories (such as *Kerana Adik*, *Hari Pesta*) and also novels (*Ombak Bukan Biru* (1977), *Kepulauan* (1980)). Her short stories are even circulated in Singapore through 'Mutiara' magazine.

Based on the previous fact that many writers have written best works yet it is still in national circulation, the role of translation becomes important to take control for the increase of Malay literature circulation. The perspective of translation should be changed from the old mindset. It is not like the condition of traditional literature which always has adhered to the metaphrase (word for word) process. Nowadays, the concept of reading in translation should be in form of reading new text from the process of paraphrase yet the coherence to the original content and concept should be kept in exist. There should be no more doubt to translate a text by doing paraphrase as long as the meaning is still the same. The use of footnote

as the additional explanation for some traditional words can be the option too. A well done free translation is the translation that has its own integrity and it may succeed with readers by fitting in with their literary taste.⁸ It cannot be denied that the translator has to have both literary and moral responsibility to the translation.⁹ So, it is to say that translation must gratify both the readers and also the original texts.

Besides some writings that have not been translated into English, Malay literature also has some writings that have already been translated into English. Khadijah Hashim and Siti Zainon Ismail are the well known writers whose writings have been translated into English and circulated globally. Khadijah's first novel, *Badai Semalam* (1968) can be grouped into canon Malay because it has been used as text book in Malaysia and Singapore. This novel is also translated into English, *Storms of Yesterday* (1991) by Mahani Abdul Hamid and even in Spanish, *Tormentos del Ayer* (2010) by Alberto Balanza and Yahia. Her children's story book series such as "Siri Lagenda", "Siri Aura dan Fauna" and "Siri Teladan dari Rimba" have been translated into English by the Institut Terjemahan Negara Malaysia (2009).¹⁰ Siti Zainon Ismail is also recognized by her English translation poetry and novel, such as "The Moon is a Candle" (1952), *Pulau Renek Ungu (The Island of the Purple Crocus* (1995)), *Bait Senandung Malam: Dari Stesan ke Stesen (The Rhythm of Night Songs: From Station to Station* (2009)).

The Use of English as Vernacular Language in Modern Malay Literature

Instead of doing translation, the tendency to use English directly as the language in novels has been done by many modern Malay writers and authors. The native Malay writers such as Rani Manicka, Preeta Samarasan, and Dina Zaman write their works in English. Rani's novel are *The Rice Mother* (winning SEA Award), *Touching Heart* (2005), and *The Japanese Lover* (2009). One of Preeta's best novel is Evening

is *The Whole Day* (won Hopwood Novel Award), and her short story is "Our House Stands in a City of Flower" (won Hyphen Asian American Short Story Contest or the Asian American Writers' Workshop in 2007). Dina Zaman, she writes series of short stories, "King of the Sea" (Silverfish Books, 2012) and also non-fiction book entitle *Holy Men, Holy Women*.

The use of English as vernacular language in Malay literature is seen as the way to build more relation between Malay and global world. This is also as the effect of constant relation between British and Malay region. The rapid development in using English is influenced by the high growth of British and Malay relation in education. There are many Malay students who study abroad and learn English as the international language and finally being accustomed to the use of it as the vernacular language in daily use.

Translated or Not To Be Translated

The fact that there is the decline of translation in Malay literature can be described based on several reasons bellow:

Translation and Business of Publishing

It is not an easy way to deal with translation process because there will be several considerations that should be taken in order to make the translation process and circulation is successful. Dessauer proposed that books are vehicles of ideas, instruments of education, vessels of literature, and sources of entertainment, yet the task of bringing them into existence and of purveying them to their readers is a commercial one requiring all the resources and skill of the manager and entrepreneur.¹¹ Translation is one part of business too in which the consideration of target market and also readers are the important factor in circulating the works. As Susan Basnett mentions that there should be a need for research into the area of 'translation and the market'.¹² By analyzing the target and also the market, the

process of translation can be done more effectively.

Moreover, the role of publisher is also important in producing a translation verse of literary works. For many case, there is tendency from the publisher to focus the process of translation into small number books which are likely to be best-sellers, and are extremely cautious about publishing books appealing to a minority.¹³ It can be seen from Khadijah's novel *Badai Semalam (Storms of Yesterday)* which has been translated into English because it has been the canon (used as source text in school curriculum) in Malay literature. Here, the translation holds the great role in presenting the canon text and the publisher sees the big chance to circulate this valuable canon in global world.

Translation, the Author and the Audience

The development of translation process is also affected by the authors. Individual authors in any language will be accepted if their work is felt to be relevant and attractive enough to cross frontiers and barriers.¹⁴ In case of Siti Zainon's novel *Pulau Renek Ungu (The Island of the Purple Crocus)*, she presents the story of her semi-autobiography as the historical, mystery, travel and romance writings. It is attractive novel to be translated because it shows the life of Malay woman in travelling and studying abroad, brings the past experience of colonialism and also reflects the religion power of Malay people. It makes Zainon's novel is regarded to cross frontier and border and worthy enough to be translated. Furthermore, the reputation of the authors also determines the process of translation toward their writings. Schulte mentions that they (publishers) will choose authors who already have a visible reputation in their own country, have been translated before into English, and therefore constitute less of a commercial risk.¹⁵ So, in Malay literature, the most translated writings are for the authors who have been recognized as the famous one in their country. For this condition,

translation verse will be available in limited works and of course it will decline the translation verse of Malay literature. Thus, the minor writers and authors will have lack position in translation process and Malay authors have to increase the ability of their writers to produce a very well writings.

In case of audience, translation gets decline because the absence for the audience or the readers. It is about the limitation of readers who can understand English, as it is proposed by Mithchinson that the absence of audience refers to as the problem of 'the cultural insularity or little Englandism of the reading public'.¹⁶ This problem may appear as the problem for some readers who still want to read in vernacular language rather than English. Even though English can be understood by many people, but to read in vernacular language still gives the easy access to understand the detail of the story.

All of the factors of translation above have made the emergences of translation verse to be fluid in practice. The consideration of market, author and audience really affect the decline and incline of translation. In Malay literature, the translation verse is decline because the limited skillful author who can write outside the border and provide the 'sold' writings. This will affect the passion of publisher to take the writings into translation.

The decline of translation can affect the emergence of Malay-English language. This can be defined from two different perspective indeed whether the emergence of Malay English novel is as the resistance for the decline of translation or even the Malay English novel itself is the reason for the declining of translation novel. However, Malay English novel has impact to the circulation of Malay literature as world literature. In fact, this novel makes Malay to be recognized in other countries. The role of English as the international English gives so much advantage to attract the attention of the readers. So, the problem of translated or not to be translated is actually about the wise decision from Malay whether the literature will be kept in translation verse or be shifted into the Malay English form. There must be

balance between those forms because translation may keep the existence of national literature and Malay English novel can provide the existence of Malay literature in global world.

CONCLUSION

To keep literature as the national treasure is important. One way to keep it is by writing literary works in vernacular language. This national treasure then can be circulated internationally by the use of translation. Yet,

the translation is not a stable process because it needs some requirement and considerations. Another alternative such as the production of Malay English novels emerges both as the rival and companion for translation. However, both the translation and non translation writings brings the contribution to the circulation of Malay literature and it needs the balance in its production.

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