WORLD LITERATURE AND ITS EFFECTS ON CULTURAL ASPECTS

Deta Maria Sri Darta
STiBA Satya Wacana Salatiga
detamaria@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the cultural effects, both positive and negative, when a literary work enters the circle of world literature (through translation). Penetrating a world literature can be said as one of the goals of a literary piece. A work of art is made to be acknowledged by people across nations, that is through world literature. To enter the circle, a work should be written in English as the international language. If a work is written in other languages than English, it should undergo a process called translation. In the translation process, there are things that cannot be transferred successfully into the target language, and one of it is cultural aspect. The effect on culture due to the translation process done for the sake of world literature can be positive when the cultural aspect is transferred successfully. It will make the cultural aspect from a certain nation acknowledged by people across nations to promote understanding. While the negative effect is inevitable when the transfer of the cultural aspect is failed, which may influence and shape one’s perception. Some examples taken from several Indonesian literary works and their English translations are provided to give an insight of how the cultural things can be affected.

Keywords: world literature, translation, cultural aspects

Introduction

A work of art is written to be widely known and appreciated, by many people, across nations, different social and cultural background. Some works although written by different writers from different cultural backgrounds share similar theme and message, although they are written in different languages. This idea underlies the issue of world literature. Goethe says that there is an idea of universality; that works of art from different countries may share similarity1. This statement has also been stated by Aristotle in his Poetics long before (about 330 B.C). The word ‘imitator’ is the key word. Aristotle argues that Epic poetry, Tragedy, and also Comedy (which represent literary works all over the world) are the same in terms of their modes of imitation2. They are different only in their means, objects, and manner. Literary works, according to Aristotle, are imitation because their origin has been a part of human nature, which differentiates human with other creatures and they learn first by imitation3. Thus, human is the most imitative creature.

The issue of world literature has been oriented on western culture. Although the idea is on globalism, still the standard used is based on the western standard. A literary work can

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3 Levin 132-133.
earn a ticket to enter the world literature if it has been translated into English. But there is another problem that might arise in the process of translating; there might be certain things that cannot be transferred successfully into English. Things that have something to do with cultural background sometimes cannot be found their equivalent in English culture. It cannot be avoided since literary work is a product of society; it carries the culture in which the society believed in.

The idea of the requirements of world literature varies from one theorist to another. Although Goethe is the first person who coins the world literature (Weltliteratur), Damrosch says that that Goethe is no multiculturalists; he still believes in the prominence and privilege of the Western as his modern world reference and he might always return to Greece and Rome. Moreover, according to Goethe there are three concepts of world literature: as classic, as canon of masterpieces, or multiple windows on the world. But for David Damrosch, the world literature depends on the mode of circulation and of reading. Thus what is considered of world literature differs from one person to another. A bulk of literary pieces might in and out of the circle of world literature at a certain period. It depends on the readers; whether or not the work functions as world literature for some readers.

Moreover Damrosch reveals that world literature is writing than gains in translation. It means that any literary works can be world literature only if being translated into the language of world wide. Thus, the relation between world literature and translation is undoubtly tight.

This paper would like to see the effects of translation process to some cultural aspects. Some literary works are chosen to give clear examples. The selected literary works are the original works and their translation versions, such as Maxim Gorky’s Mother and Ibunda, and Ahmad Tohari’s Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk and The Dancer.

**Discussion**

Being an important tool to help literary works to achieve their goals makes translation close to some sensitive issues. According to Mona Baker in her book *In Other Words*, translating cultural aspect is one of the problems emerged in translation. Since a literary work is a product of society, cultural aspects are embedded in it; thus, making no room for translator to avoid translating the cultural aspect along with translating the work.

When the translator thinks that her job is done after translating a work, the effect starts to grow. There are two possibilities that might happen to the cultural aspects in the work translated. On one hand, when it is successfully transferred into the target language, the cultural aspects find their way to the international awareness. On the other hand, when the

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4 Damrosch 12.
5 Damrosch 12.
6 Damrosch 5.
7 Damrosch 281.
translator fails to transferred the cultural aspects into the target language, it may create a hole in the work itself.

An example of the positive effects of the translation to the cultural aspects is taken from the English version of Mother. Margaret Wettlin who translated the work from Russian into English, preserved several words or terms. There are three specific words maintained: ‘nenko’, ‘Tatar’, ‘khokhol’. Each of them is explained in the following paragraphs.

The term ‘nenko’ is found on page 27 of the English version “Whoever gave you such a blow on the head, nenko*?” The word then is explained in the foot note: “*Nenko – affectionate term of “mother” used in the Ukraine – Trans.” This makes people who read the novel understand that there is a specific term for “mother” used in Ukraine. The footnote helps the readers to understand that although the figure of mother called ‘nenko’ by her son’s friend, is considered as his own mother. There are further clues about the choice of word. His son’s friend states the reason of calling her ‘nenko’ ...

The existence of the term ‘nenko’ gives an emphasis how the man respects his friend’s mother, that even he called her with a specific term of mother from the culture of his origin. ‘Nenko’ cannot be translated into ‘mommy’ because the sense is different. Thus there is no equal English word to replace ‘nenko’.

The second term ‘tatar’ on page 28: “... Are you Tatar?” is also defined in the footnote; ‘tatar’ is defined as “Old-clothes men were commonly called Tatars”10. Being kept as in the original version, it gives additional information about Ukrainian traditional culture. Moreover, the definition gives clearer depiction of Mother’s knowledge about traditional culture in Ukraine. This line can be used in analyzing Mother’s characteristics. It shows that Mother is not an ignorant person; she has knowledge about other society in her neighborhood.

The word ‘khokhol’ is also preserved and explained in the footnote. According to the explanation in the footnote, ‘khokhol’ means Russian nickname for a Ukrainian11. It also offers additional information about the multicultural life in Russia, so that the people give nickname to the other society.

Pramoedya in translating Mother into bahasa Indonesia also preserved the three terms maintained by Wettlin. He also used footnote to explain the meaning of the three terms: for the term ‘nenko’ he explained as “panggilan kekeluargaan sebagai pengganti ‘ibu’ digunakan di daerah Ukraina”12, ‘tatar’ means “orang-orang yang berpakaian lama biasa dinamai Tatar”13, while ‘khokhol’ is defined as “julukan bagi orang Ukraina”14. Thus, he helped the

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10 Gorky 28.
11 Gorky 28.
13 Gorky, 28.
14 Gorky, 28.
Ukrainian and Russian terms to be acknowledged by Indonesian readers, especially the readers of *Ibunda*.

The preservation of the original terms not only helps in understanding the culture, but also enriches the analysis of the novel. For example, the word *nenko* gives clue to the readers how loveable the Mother is. Since *nenko* suggests the idea of affectionate term to call mother, when it is said by other people than her own children, it shows that the mother has a certain value so that other people consider her as their own mother. The word also implies that Ukrainian culture put mother in a special position so that the society creates a loving term to address mother.

The example of the negative effects of the translation is taken from *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* and its English version, *The Dancer*. This is one of Tohari’s novels which has been translated into several languages including English. In the Indonesian version there is a part when Tohari wrote a Javanese belief saying that

“Bila pulang ke Dukuh Paruk jangan khawatir soal makan. Sudah ada yang siap *olah-olah, ngumbah-ngumbah*, dan *mlumah*. He... he ... Ah, maafkan aku. Ini ada kiriman dari Srintil. Hanya dia yang sampai saat ini mampu menanak nasi. Dan jangan takut, karena tak ada apa-apanya. Aku tidak menaruh pekasih di situ,”

The sentence was stated by Nyai Kartareja as a clue for Rasus that Srintil was ready and waiting for him to marry. René T. A. Lysloff, the translator, omits the part of “*Sudah ada yang siap *olah-olah, ngumbah-ngumbah*, dan *mlumah*” in the English version, as we can see in

“While you are home here in Paruk, you needn’t worry about eating. This is from Srintil. She is the only person in the village who is able to serve cooked rice. Now don’t be afraid, there’s nothing to be worried about. I didn’t add any love potions.”

Compared to the original Indonesian version, the English version, especially in this part is lacking of the clues that help the readers to understand the real condition and culture of Dukuh Paruk as a part of Javanese society. It is the tradition of Javanese people to say things indirectly. Nyai Kartareja would like to give clues to say to Rasus that Srintil had changed; that she was not a *ronggeng* anymore, thus making her illegible to be Rasus’ wife.

Hence the omission might result on the different interpretation. Another misinterpretation that is possible to happen is when a researcher would like to analyze the English version from the point of view of feminism. Not knowing the specific part, the researcher might lose the information on the patriarchal value in the novel. As in Javanese culture, the idea of a good wife is the one who can perform domestic tasks, that is *olah-olah* (cooking), *ngumbah-ngumbah* (washing), and *mlumah* (‘serving’ husband in bed). When a girl is able to cook and wash, she is ready to be married.

The illustration taken from *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* and *The Dancer* shows that there is something missing if a culture specific term is not successfully transferred into the target

language. The cultural meaning that is carried by the term(s) or the sentence(s) will not be able to bear the same popularity as the novel has after being translated into other languages.

**Conclusion**

Translation serves as a crucial means for literary works to obtain their goals in entering the world literature. However, translating literary works is not an easy task to do due to the cultural aspects embedded within the literary works, as Anica Glodjović has stated in her paper entitled “Translation as a Means of Cross-Cultural Communication: Some Problems in Literary Text”. The success and failure of the cultural translation in the literary works will result on the continuation of the cultural aspects associated.

Knowing the importance of cultural translation, translators should be wise in transferring the cultural aspects. The existence of strategies which help translators in translating literary text, gives variation for them in doing their job. These variations hopefully will not create various versions, since the border between translating and recreating is very thin.

**References**


