**Kebaya or bolero: Which one is more English?**

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*Kebaya or Bolero: Which one is more English?* investigates – after Said – the “configurations of power” between an Indonesian editor and his (American) English translator, and the effects their struggle for power had on the voice of the original author.

Keywords: bowdlerization, commercialism, editing, Indonesian, mistranslation, orientalism.

Cet article, intitulé « *Kebaya ou Bolero: Lequel des deux mots est plus anglais ?* » explore, suivant Said, les « configurations des rapports de force » entre un éditeur indonésien et son traducteur anglais (américain) et les effets de leur lutte de pouvoir sur la voix de l’auteur du texte original.

Mots clés : expurgation, mercantilisme, révision, indonésien, mauvaise traduction, orientalisme

This is going to be a *j'accuse* of some sort. It will showcase the “high-handed executive attitude”¹ of a translator and a native-speaker of English when he had to deal with being edited by an editor and a native-speaker of the language of the original work (Indonesian). I am the editor in question. Take it as another example of the empire writing back, sometimes with gusto. The point is to show, once again, that “the relationship between Occident [the translator] and Orient [the editor, me] is a relationship of power, of domination,”² and its protreptic mission, via Said again, to convince that “ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied.”³

We will begin with an overview of the Indonesian literary scene when the translation, *They Say I’m A Monkey*, and the original collection of short-stories, *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!* were produced, between 2002 and 2005.
**Sastra Wangi/Fragrant literature**

Djenar Maesa Ayu's original collection of short stories in Indonesian, *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!* was published in 2002, at the height of the ‘sastra wangi’ trend in Indonesia. Some (western) commentators – mostly Indonesianists and journalists – translated ‘sastra wangi’ as ‘fragrant literature,’ (mis)interpreting the word ‘wangi,’ which does mean ‘fragrant’, as referring to the quality of the writing produced by a new wave of writers, mostly, like Djenar, young(ish) women with precious little body of work.

The fact was that ‘sastra wangi’ was a pejorative term, coined by the older, mostly male and straight, guard of the Indonesian literary scene. ‘Wangi’ actually refers to the fact that this new wave of female writers were mostly young, good-looking women who, perhaps unlike the stereotypical impoverished, living-on-the-street, male Indonesian writers, are not averse to perfume. The suggestion was that the only thing ‘wangi’ about these writers was their body odour. Who knows (or cares) about their writing?

It was in this kind of atmosphere that the short stories in *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!* were written and published in 2002. The translation itself, published by the boutique (read: struggling) imprint Metafor, appeared in 2005. Metafor, where I used to work as an editor, ran its business out of the chain import bookstore QB in Jakarta, Indonesia, publishing among others a series of English translations of classic Indonesian literature before it folded in the late 2000s.

**The Translation Scene in Indonesia**

Hardly any contemporary Indonesian literature is being translated into English. Metafor had a project of translating a few selected works, but had problems finding
the right translators, and the money to pay them. The English translation of the work which many think is the catalyst for the ‘sastra wangi’ movement, *Saman* by Ayu Utami, was published in the same year as the translation of Djenar’s book, even though its Indonesian original was first published in 1998 (by Gramedia, the same major publishing company that published Djenar’s book).

*Saman* was translated by a senior Indonesianist, Pam Allen from the University of Tasmania, Australia, and published by another struggling imprint based in Jakarta, Equinox. Apart from Metafor and Equinox, there was also Lontar Foundation, a non-profit publishing house which was more into releasing translations of classic works of Indonesian literature. Metafor has now gone bankrupt and Equinox is reduced to releasing books cobbled from old articles in Cornell University’s *Indonesia* journal. Lontar Foundation started its Modern Library of Indonesia series in October 2010. Currently, the catalog includes *Sitti Nurbaya* by Marah Rusli, a book originally published in 1922 and *Salah Asuhan* by Abdoel Moeis, first published in 1928.

When the translation of Djenar’s *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!* was being prepared, there was only one Indonesian book in English translation still in print, Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s *Buru Quartet (This Earth of Mankind, Child of All Nations, Footsteps and House of Glass)*, translated by Max Lane, originally published by Penguin Australia as paperbacks. It has since been available in hardcover from Hyperion and William Morrow in the U.S. and in paperback from Penguin USA. Pramoedya was the only Indonesian author published in translation by a major commercial publisher.

The Indonesian to English translation scene is, to cut the story short, non-existent. Indeed, the same thing could be said about the translation of Indonesian literary works
to any language. Indonesian literature, unlike Latin American literature or Japanese literature, is not ‘sexy’ (i.e. it won’t bring in any money).

Some people apparently thought that ‘sastra wangi’ could be (made) sexy. As Katrin Bandel pointed out in an essay critical of Ayu Utami’s pseudo-feminist writing, this enthusiasm had arisen out of the novelty that in both *Saman* and *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!*, sexuality is discussed provocatively, something which was not the done thing for mainstream writers during Suharto’s New Order dictatorship, which ended in 1998. There were sadomasochistic fantasies, partner-swapping, lesbianism, bisexuality, and adultery in *Saman*. There were childhood trauma, sexual abuse, open critique of conventional gender relations in *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!* Since that time, apart from *Saman* and *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!*, only Fira Basuki’s *Jendela-Jendela (The Windows)* has been translated into English (Eka Kurniawan’s *Cantik Itu Luka* was translated into Japanese and Malaysian). That’s three books out of supposedly a whole new generation of writers. Perhaps, it was only the enthusiasm of two local publishers, Metafor’s Richard Oh and Equinox’s Mark Hanusz, which made the translations possible.

**Lost in No Translation**

This brings us to a slew of practical problems in translating Indonesian literature into English. First, apart from Pramoedya’s exceptional case, no big money has ever been made from it, which meant that in the mid-2000s there was never any offer from commercial English-language publishers to translate Indonesian literature. No one even bothered to offer an exploitative deal to obtain the world rights to a book by any Indonesian author.
Michael Nieto Garcia, Djenar’s translator, came to Indonesia from Cornell University to research new developments in the Indonesian publishing industry. He was the latest in a long line of Cornell Indonesianists to have come to Jakarta. The result of his research was later published as an essay in an academic journal. He made friends with Djenar and Richard Oh, who often hung out at one of Richard’s chain of independent bookshops called QB (Quality Books) in Jakarta. Richard Oh ran Metafor out of a warehouse in one of the QB shops. Garcia offered to translate Djenar’s book, and Metafor gave him a deal which would only pay him royalties (no advance) but gave him the final say in the translation, a condition which was written into his contract.

When I came to work for Metafor as an editor, the contract for the translation had already been signed and all I had to do was wait for the translation to be sent from Cornell. I was in a strange position. I was expected to edit the translation, but essentially, as the editor, I would have to agree with whatever the translator eventually decided to do.

**Commercial/Political Reality of Translation**

*This Earth of Mankind*, the first book in the English translation of Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s *Buru Quartet*, has had 13 reprints since the early 1980s. But, out of the 3000 copies (the standard number for an initial print run for a literary book in Indonesia) Metafor printed of *They Say I’m a Monkey*, the eventual English title of Djenar’s *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!* (note the missing exclamation mark and comma/caesura in the English translation), less than 1000 were sold. The translation of Ayu Utami’s *Saman* has never been reprinted either.
The different fates of the latter translations to that of Pramoedya’s books reflect changes in the commercial and political reality of the book world, as well as changes in global politics itself. Pramoedya’s *Buru Quartet* are classics of Indonesian literature, and apart from Pramoedya’s undeniable quality, foreign English publishers also had his “freedom fighter” image available to exploit to sell his books. In fact, Pramoedya was a ‘sexy’ third-world author in the 1980s and early 1990s because he was a former political prisoner whose books were banned by the repressive government of the dictator Suharto. Even now, the blurbs on the back cover of *This Earth of Mankind* include this statement: “This remarkable tale […] was originally recited orally by Indonesian political prisoner Pramoedya Ananta Toer to his fellow cellmates in daily installments.”

By the time Djenar and Ayu published their books, Suharto had been deposed and Indonesia was suddenly one of the world’s biggest democracies. Djenar and Ayu had never been in jail, they were free to write as they please – including about their own sexuality – but suddenly they were not ‘sexy’ anymore to sell as authors.

After Pramoedya released his first *Buru Quartet* book in 1980, foreign publishers (not only English-language ones) clamoured for his permission to translate his work. Many of them ended up bypassing his publisher Hasta Mitra, who was treated more like an agent, and paid his royalties directly to him.

In Djenar and Ayu’s case, their local publishers would have been only too happy to have any foreign publisher even attempt to bypass them to get the translation rights to their works. In the end, to get their books translated and published in English these two authors had to rely on two local independent publishers with scarcely any money behind them, and two western academics-cum-translators. For Michael Garcia this
would be his first attempt at a book-length translation, and for Pam Allen, Saman’s translator, it would be her first translation attempt at a novel.

**Translation Problems, or Writing Problems?**

In the chapter on translation in Jose Luis Borges’ *Borges on Writing*, Borges and his translator Norman Thomas di Giovanni agreed that there are typically two kinds of problems when attempting a translation: a writing problem and a translation problem. As an example, di Giovanni mentions that Borges’ translator must have the ability to make the narration in Borges’ stories (typically delivered by a narrator telling the story orally in the first person) sound like spoken speech, but not a monologue. This, di Giovanni said, is a writing problem, not a translation problem. The original translation manuscript I received from Michael Garcia had, despite his best intentions, a curious mix of writing and translation problems. Garcia had declared in his translation note that one of the signature traits of Djenar’s writing is its staccato rhythm, which he argued is achieved mostly through the repetition of words. He said this would be jarring, even alienating, if replicated in English. He then claimed to have invented a method to replicate the staccato rhythm without the repetition of words, which involved using and manipulating English punctuations such as em-dashes, colons and commas.

The problem is that, to Indonesian ears, Djenar’s stories may not sound as staccato as the translator had indicated. Djenar does make good use of repetition of words, but mostly not to create a staccato effect, but to shock the reader with the meaning of the words.

*Her Name (is Cunt)*
For example, in the story “Namanya,…”\textsuperscript{13} translated as “Her Name,”\textsuperscript{14} Djenar repeats the word ‘Memek,’ the name of the character, \textit{ad nauseam}. The intention is to shock the readers with the word, which is the Indonesian equivalent of the English ‘cunt.’

But not only did the translator decide not to translate the name Memek into Cunt – thus requiring an endnote to decode the story “Memek is a vulgar term for the vagina.”\textsuperscript{15} He also, true to his word, simply removed a lot of the Memeks, because as he argued in his Translation Note in the book, the repeated use of proper nouns is “ungainly, even alienating”\textsuperscript{16} to English ears. Consider the effect of his decision in this passage (even readers who do not know Indonesian may conclude just by looking at this paragraph that the repetition of ‘Memek’ should be crucial to the passage):

Memek mulai cemburu kepada teman-temannya yang mempunyai nama berawalan me. Memek iri dan merasa mereka jauh lebih beruntung. Maka, di-diam Memek mencuri buku pekerjaan rumah Melly dan membuangnya di tempat sampah. Akibatnya Melly dihukum berdiri di depan kelas.\textsuperscript{17}

And the translation:

Memek began to envy friends whose first names began with the letters me. How much more fortunate they were, she thought jealously. And so she secretly stole Melly’s homework book and threw it in the trash. As a result Melly was punished by having to stand in front of the class.\textsuperscript{18}

There were three Memeks in the original Indonesian, deliberately placed there to provoke a reaction, and there is only one in the translation, but two Mellys (which does not mean anything in Indonesian, as it is a real proper noun, a \textit{proper} proper noun).

In this case, the translator’s devised method to solve what he perceived could be a writing problem in the translation was totally unnecessary. He had created a problem – how to replicate Djenar’s staccato rhythm – when there was none. Djenar did not use a lot of Memeks to create a staccato rhythm, she used them to shock, and that
desire to shock is first and foremost what should have been carried through in the translation.

**Repetition is Meaning**

Djenar uses repetition of words and phrases elsewhere in her stories, and always with a desire to shock the readers as her motive. In a later story, “Jangan Main-main (dengan Kelaminmu)” [Don’t Play (With Your Dick)], included in her next collection, Djenar went even further and had four characters tell their different accounts of an extra-marital affair using almost identical sentences and words. In its structure, the story recalls *Rashomon* by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, or the *Four Gospels*, but Djenar used it less for its allusive effect than for its intended shocking effect of showing off to the readers how conventional most narrative techniques in Indonesian stories are and, by proxy, how modern she is. Or, according to Katrin Bandel, as an experiment in narrative style which added nothing to the story.\(^{20}\)

The real problem lies in the translator’s inability to recognize the tension between Djenar’s provocative subject matter and her desire to shock and, on the other side, the calmative effect of New Order-era Indonesian language.

**Perfected Spelling for a Broken Language**

Benedict Anderson (the doyen of Cornell University, Michael Garcia’s alma mater) made a very perceptive comment about the Indonesian language in an anthology of articles on translating ‘out of’ it. His article was actually a review of Tjamboek Berdoeri’s (aka Kwee Thiam Tjing) *Indonesia Dalem Api dan Bara*.\(^{21}\) The book was written in – according to Anderson – an untranslatable mélange of Bazaar Malay,
Indische Dutch, Hokkien, Javanese, Japanese, Madurese and other languages. It was also written in the old Dutch-era Van Ophuysen spelling.

Anderson then argued that the Suharto-led New Order (Orde Baru) government, which replaced Soekarno’s Old Order (Orde Lama – note the different spelling of ‘u/oe’ in Suharto’s and Soekarno’s name), created the newer Ejaan Yang Disempurnakan (Perfected Spelling, commonly known for its acronym EYD) to discredit literary works written before Suharto seized power. The new spelling and its attendant new idioms and vocabularies, mainly derived from bureaucratspeak, can according to Anderson give the impression that anything not written according to the new grammatical rules was primitive, leftist, useless, unreadable or downright despicable.\(^{22}\)

Anderson had even written his review in Indonesian in the Soewandi spelling (pre-EYD, post-Van Ophuysen) as if to write back against EYD – a language that exists almost entirely in writing and that hardly anyone ever actually speaks.

*Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!,* published originally by the biggest mainstream Indonesian publishing house, was written in EYD. In its current incarnation, the written EYD Indonesian is very different to spoken Indonesian, especially to Indonesian spoken in the capital, Jakarta, where Djenar lives. Reading contemporary Indonesian stories, especially those set in Jakarta, like the stories in *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!* can feel, to Indonesians, like reading a palimpsest. The readers would read the words on the page and at the same time imagine how those same words would have been said in spoken Indonesian. They would assume that the spoken Indonesian version would have been the original version in the author’s head, which was later *translated* into the Perfected Spelling of New Order Indonesian.
Sometimes, the spoken Indonesian would break through the written Indonesian as if surfacing for air. For example in this sentence from the story “Menepis Harapan”23 (translated by Michael Garcia as “Forsaken Dreams”24): “[...] seseorang bersiul, ‘Ngebul, ni ye …’” the first translation that Michael Garcia gave me was: “[...; someone yelled in Javanese, ‘Ngebul, ni ye, smoking huh?’”

I had a very long argument with the translator over this passage. First, the phrase “Ngebul, ni ye …” is not Javanese. The word ‘ngebul’ is indeed a Javanese word but as it has been appropriated by the Betawi people of Jakarta. ‘Ni ye’ meanwhile is a combo particle made up of the mangled non-Perfected Spelling of two words ‘nih’ and ‘ya’ (literally mean ‘this!’ and ‘yes!’), which indicates that the previous word ‘ngebul’ was a sort of a catcall. Djenar had even over-explained this with the verb ‘bersiul’ (‘whistles’) in the narration. So someone, obviously a Jakarta person, had whistled a catcall to a woman who was smoking.

**Listen to your Native Informant**

The fact that I had to have a long argument with the translator over what was clearly a (mis)translation problem is a sad indictment of the unequal power relationship between a “native speaker” (of English) translator and his “native” editor. The translator was also insisting that the phrase be kept in its original language, followed with a parenthetical clause explaining its meaning in English. He had also insisted on the same thing in the before mentioned story (“Namanya, …”/“Her Name”) when Djenar had used the word ‘dalang’ to describe the character Memek.25 The translator wanted the translated text to keep the word ‘dalang’ in Indonesian (this one is actually originally Javanese) followed by the parenthetical clause “– the puppet master of traditional wayang shadow plays –”. This had the unfortunate effect of
over-explaining a metaphor (Memek was a puppet master), and thus making it less effective, introducing another foreign word which may alienate English readers (‘wayang’) and superimposing the translator’s voice on top of the author’s.

In both cases, we were able to reach a compromise (the not-so-idiomatic “Hey, smokemouth!”\(^{26}\) for the catcall in “Menepis Harapan” (“Forsaken Dreams”) and a plain ‘dalang’\(^{27}\) (with endnote, of course) in “Namanya, …” (“Her Name”). But the arguments would have been much less heated (and shorter) had the native speaker (of English) translator realized that he is not a native speaker of Indonesian and that he can still make (elementary) mistakes when he reads the Indonesian text and should sometimes heed the editorial voices of his ‘native’ editor).

Realizing that the original Indonesian text is likely to have already been a form of translation from less formal, spoken, Indonesian might have also suggested to the translator alternative strategies of translation. Borges always told his translator di Giovanni to “fling it [the original] aside and be free!”\(^{28}\) If Djenar’s translator had been more aware of the tension between Djenar’s subversive tendencies and the stifling effects of proper EYD Indonesian, he would have translated the name of the character Memek in “Her Name” as ‘Cunt’ to try to replicate in English the – hopefully – shocking effect of using the taboo word repeatedly. He could also have translated ‘nya’ in ‘Namanya’ as ‘is,’ instead of omitting it, as well as reinsert the trailing ellipsis in the title. The translated title would have become “Her name is …,” which would have replicated the shock that Djenar must have intended for her readers when they read the title of the original story “Namanya, …” (“Her name is …”) and then the first word of the story ‘Memek (‘Cunt’). Her name is Cunt!

As it was, the translator seemed to feel himself trapped between, as he says in his translation note, “pulling the reader gently toward the foreignness of the source
language and culture”29 and his worries that the foreignness might alienate English-language readers.

The perfect example of this ambiguity can be found in the translator’s original list of endnotes for the translation. In it, there was an entry for ‘kepayang’: “tree that produces the spice keluak. One who is mabuk kepayang (drunk with kepayang) is madly in love, or slightly intoxicated.” He had to have this note because in a passage in the story “Asmoro”30 (the name of the main character, which means ‘Love’), he had translated “Asmoro mabuk kepayang”31 as “He is drunk with kepayang.” The problem is that (apart from ending up with a very awkward sentence) “mabuk kepayang” is a dead metaphor for most Indonesians, the equivalent of (to use George Orwell’s famous example) ‘iron resolution’ in English. No Indonesian would stop to think twice about the phrase. No one would even remember that kepayang is actually a tree. The entry on kepayang in the translator’s notes would have made a nice entry in an Indonesian dictionary, but in this translation it was totally unnecessary. It would have been better (or at least, less alienating) to use ‘madly in love’ instead of “drunk with kepayang.” We finally settled on “punch-drunk.”32

The Orientalist Trap

The translator seems here to have taken on the role of early Orientalists who stumbled upon a strange text and became hell-bent on creating a dictionary to explain its meaning.

Such a seemingly beneficent but ultimately misleading stance on translating a text can only create more problems for the translator. A good example is when Djenar’s translator originally wanted to translate ‘kebaya’ as ‘bolero’ in the story “Melukis Jendela”33 (translated as “Painting a Window”34). This time he did not want the
original Indonesian word ‘kebaya’ to stay in the (translated) text. But in his haste to find an equivalent word that would be less alienating to English-language readers, he ended up with Spanish. In the end, we flung the bolero aside and went back to the plain ‘kebaya,’ with endnote.

My editorial voices in this translation were very faint. But Djenar’s authorial voices were even fainter. Djenar was hardly ever consulted while the translation was being prepared. After a few discussions with her after the translation was handed in, it also became clear to us that it would have taken too long to rewrite some parts of the translation to better express her original voice, so we decided to leave the translation as it was. It had to be ready for the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival in Bali. It was going to be launched there with much fanfare, and with the hope that some commercial English-language publishers might notice it and pick it up. Don’t mind the authorial, editorial, or translatorial voices, as always, the commercial voices win.

In the end, the translator’s initial reluctance to heed the advice of his editor can be seen as an example of the way the Western, Orientalist, semi-academic translation industry deals with an original work from the Orient, by, as Said remarked “making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, [...] settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”35 This article is an attempt to wrest some of that authority back.

Notes

2 Said, Orientalism, p. 5.
3 Said, Orientalism, p. 5.
I will refer to Indonesian names using their first name – Indonesian style – throughout this article.

The first volume of the original Buru Quartet was published by Hasta Mitra in 1980, the last volume in 1988.


Di Giovanni, Halpern and MacShane, eds. *Borges on Writing*, p. 114.


Said, *Orientalism*, p. 3.

Said, *Orientalism*, p. 3.
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