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Translating *Laskar Pelangi* into *The Rainbow Troops*

The Rainbow Troops, or *Laskar Pelangi* in Bahasa Indonesian, is set on the small island of Belitong, in East Sumatra, Indonesia. It tells the story of a tight-knit group of students and their teacher fighting for education and dignity, even as they face continual hardship. Fabulously rich in natural resources, Belitong is also home to chronic poverty and educational discrimination.

The novel is a memoir that was written by trying to balance and associate personal issues with bigger ones concerning government policies on education, natural resource management, and human rights. Though the novel contains criticisms against government policies, especially a state-owned company exploiting tin resources on the island, the criticisms are delivered in a way that is modest and tolerant.

The discrimination took place as the state-owned company built its own public facilities, including schools, but left the native Belitong behind. The children of native Belitong couldn't go to the company's schools simply because their parents either did not work for the company or worked for it at the very low employment level.

The challenge of its translation into other languages was how to capture the nature of the novel, which conveys the sad story of a fifteen-year old girl, Muslimah, and her uncle, who dedicate their lives to running a very poor school with ten unfortunate students who are native Belitong, with laughter and lightheartedness. It tells of oppressed people protesting in good humor, without swearing, without violence, without a divisive political movement, and without anyone to take up their cause. At the same time, the story in its original version has a strong tendency to address serious issues, such as the right to education. It also addresses corporate exploitation. It frames these issues within the tale of beautiful childhood journey and friendship.

Translating *Laskar Pelangi* into English took seven months. One of the most difficult parts was conveying the emotions in English in the same way that they are conveyed in Bahasa Indonesian. Along with tapping into universal emotions is the overall construction of irony in the novel, as the story of *Laskar Pelangi* is actually a story of a poor native community living on a very rich island, where children do not even have access to education.

Reconstructing the ideas within a paragraph was a challenge that had to be taken into consideration in order to maintain the sense of original emotions. For example, the most emotional parts of the text occur when one of the main characters, Lintang, has to leave the school and when the old teacher passes away:

"It was dead silent. The birds that usually played in the filicium were silent, too. Everyones' hearts were drowning in tears at having the pearl of knowledge taken away from school. We hugged Lintang as a symbol of saying goodbye. His tears fell slowly, his hug tight like he didn't want to let go. His body shook when his noble soul was forced to leave the school. I couldn't bear to see his miserable face, and no matter how hard I tried, my sadness won and emptied my eyes of their tears. It turned into a silent, tearless

cry; it was so painful. I couldn't even utter a fragment of a word to say goodbye. We were all sobbing. Muslimah's lips quivered holding back tears, her eyes red. But not one tear fell from her eyes. She wanted us to be strong. My chest ached seeing her like that. That afternoon was the saddest afternoon in the history of Belitong, from the Linggang River delta to Pangkalan Punai Beach, from Mirang Bridge to Tanjong Pandan. It was the saddest afternoon in the world. At the moment I realized that we all were actually the brothers of light and fire. We pledged to be faithful through strikes of lightning and mountain-moving tornadoes. Our pledge was written in the seven layers of the sky, witnessed by the mysterious dragons that ruled the South China Sea. Together, we were the most beautiful rainbow ever created by God."

In most cases, in translating the paragraphs, the translator had to reconstruct them from their Indonesian version in order to maintain the intensity of sadness:

"On a silent evening, a poor man with a heart as big as the sky passed away. One of the wells of knowledge in the forsaken, dry field was gone forever. He died on his battlefield, the school he fought to keep alive until his last breath. A noble death, just like he always wanted. There were no rounds of gunshots to salute him, no flower arrangements, no awards from the government or speeches from the Education Minister, no glorifying monument of any kind from anybody. But he had left a pure well in the hearts of eleven students, a well of knowledge that would never dry up. We wept in the classroom. The one who sobbed most heart wrenchingly was Harun. Pak Harfan had been like a father to him. He sobbed and sobbed; he couldn't be consoled. His heavy tears streamed down, soaking his shirt."

Cultural translation and its attendant quandaries--knowing when to explain something and when to just leave it as is--are a constant concern. One of the goals in translating *Laskar Pelangi* into English is to share it with the world--not just South Asian Studies classes--in the hopes that *Laskar Pelangi* will appear to a wider audience.

As the author of *Laskar Pelangi*, I am satisfied with the translation, mostly because the prominent impression I would like the readers to feel from reading the English version of the novel has been successfully presented. This impression is of the characters and the central theme of education from any angle. The way the natives of Belitong value their existence, in the community, amongst each other, and in relation to government policies, as well as their innocent expectations, has somehow made the international version of the novel a universally touching experience.