

Representing Islam: old myths in the new medium

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Abstract

This study focuses on the adaptation of Islamic-mystic magazines into religious soap operas in Indonesia. This study concludes that for the producers, Islamic soap opera plays an economic function: to get more audiences and more economic profit. But, for the audience, religious soap opera plays a cultural function: to maintain and reconfirm their traditional beliefs. It leads us to the theoretical conclusion that this adaptation practice is a mechanism of self-translation of Javanese culture.

Keywords: *Islam representation; Islamic-mystic magazine; religious soap opera; market orientation; cultural self-translation.*

1. Introduction

In the Indonesian society, religion plays important roles in almost all aspects of the everyday life. The representation of religion, especially Islam, has a long history and happens in almost all types of media. One of the recent popular media is religious soap opera, first emerged in 2004. In May 2005, according to AC Nielsen survey, there were 35 titles of them (Khudori & Pitakasari 2005). Even, I found at least 44 titles of religious soap operas in all Indonesian television during 2004 to 2007 (Nazaruddin 2008). During 2017 – 2018, this genre was popular again, especially in the Indonesian television.

The aim of the study is to understand the very basics norms underlying the adaptation. The materials of the study are Hidayah magazine, one of the most popular Islamic-

mystic magazine in Indonesia, as the source texts, and *Rahasia Ilahi* (The Secret of God), the highest-rating religious soap opera, as the target texts.

2. Method

The study was conducted through two stages. Firstly, I did general analysis of the religious soap operas and Islamic-mystic magazines. It was hand in hand with my daily activities as audience who had routinely watched and read them. Secondly, I have analysed some editions of Hidayah magazine, randomly chosen from 2003 to 2006 editions. I have also analysed some episodes of *Rahasia Ilahi*, an adaptation of *Iktibar* column in Hidayah magazine.

A methodological weakness should be noted here. Watching the soap operas on YouTube, I am not able to identify the specific

time when the soap operas aired on the Indonesian television, since YouTube does not mention it. However, rechecking the title of these soap operas with another sources in Internet, I strongly suppose that they were aired between 2004 and 2007. In general, this weakness did not make a methodological lack of this study because the purpose of the observation is to identify the narrative structures of the religious soap operas, so that the data on show times could be ruled out.

In this research, I follow a model proposed by Cattrysse (1992), consists of four steps: the selection policy of the source texts, the adaptation policy of the texts, the function of the target text within its contexts, and the relations between selection–adaptation policies and the function of the target text within its context. In the previous publication, I have described the selection and adaptation policies as the first and second steps. I have concluded some norms underlying the adaptation of Islamic-mystic magazines into religious soap operas, which are related to one another in certain hierarchical relations (Nazaruddin 2017). I have emphasizes (Nazaruddin 2017: 7):

The most fundamental norm is the popularity or market preference, determining the choice of adaptation from popular Islamic-mystic magazines, into soap operas that are also extremely popular. Thus, it is not a matter of Islamic propagation, but commodification of Islam. This economic motivation determines two subsequent norms, i.e. the narrative standardization and faithfulness. The flexible narrative sequence in the magazine should be standardized into fixed cause-effect narrative structure of soap opera. It creates a more specific norm, namely extreme binary opposition, which are already exist in the source text but amplified in the target text. Meanwhile, faithful norm has three aspects, namely adequacy, factual, and Islamic teaching conformity principles. This three-aspects of faithfulness is specific feature of the translation of religious texts.

This paper is actually the second part of this previous publication, focusing on the issue the adaptation function and the relations between function and policies of adaptation, as the third and fourth steps as proposed by Cattrysse (1992).

3. The function of adaptation

Generally, translation studies assume the existence of distance between the source text and the target text; it could be linguistic distance, cultural distance, historical distance, or combination of them. The linguistic distance exists when the source text comes from different language with the target text, which also means cultural distance. Jakobson (1966: 233) call it as interlingual translation. The linguistic distance makes exoticization and naturalization concepts become important (Delabatista 1993). The historical distance occurs when the source text comes from different historical period, long before the historical period of the target text. This makes modernization and historization concepts become vital (Delabatista 1993). The combination of them appears if the source text comes from the past as well as from different language with the target text.

However, in the adaptation of Islamic-mystic magazines into religious soap operas, there is no linguistic, cultural, or historical distance. The source text comes from the same linguistic, cultural and historical contexts with the target text. MD Entertainment, a big production house in Indonesia, even adapts the stories in *Hidayah* magazine with a very close time gap. They produce soap opera of the stories of the latest edition of *Hidayah* magazine, and broadcast them on TransTV, one Indonesian television, not more than one month from the publication of *Hidayah* magazine as the source text (Majalah Hidayah 2005: 107). The distinctive aspect is the medium: written (magazine) and audio-visual (soap opera) form, which Jakobson (1966: 233) said as intersemiotic translation. According to Delabatista (1993), no difference between the source text and the target text in linguistic and cultural codes. But, the difference exists in textual codes. Hence, in this case, the

soap opera as a textual code becomes very important. Here, we should ask, why do the producers select soap opera as the adaptation form of the journalistic report in the magazine? In my opinion, this question should be answered through the exploration of the positions of soap opera within the television industry in Indonesia, or more general the positions of soap opera in the contemporary Indonesian society.

In the era of television superiority in Indonesia, soap opera is 'never-ending' television program. Since its appearance in the 1990's until now, soap opera always becomes the most popular television program in Indonesia. In 2002, in a week, we could mention more than 69 titles of soap operas. In this year, more than 70 hours of broadcast time in one week is used for the soap operas, especially in the prime time at 7:00 to 21:00 pm. RCTI, SCTV, and INDOSIAR, three of eleven Indonesian television stations, broadcast more than 15 titles of soap operas in a week. According to AC Nielsen survey in the middle of February 2002, ten television programs that have highest rating (more than 12 points) are dominated by soap opera (Kompas 2002). In December 2006, AC Nielsen survey again showed that soap opera dominates (43%) the list of 100 highest-rating television programs in Indonesia.

The popularity of soap opera could also be observed from the length of its episodes. In 2002, *Gerhana* (Eclipse) was run over 200 episodes, *Jin dan Jun* (Jin and Jun) has reached 320 episodes, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* (The Mystery of Mount Merapi) still had high rating in its 260 episode, and *Spontan* (Spontaneous) has attained 300 episodes (Kompas 2002). In 2007, *Cinta Fitri* (The Love of Fitri) achieved over 122 episodes, *Intan* was more than 264 episodes, and the longest record was *Tersanjung*, which had 356 episodes from 1998 to 2005 (Ivvaty 2007).

Indonesian soap operas constantly change their themes. In the beginning of its emergence in the 1990s, the theme was marital conflict. The theme was then shifted to the love story of young executives, shifted again to the love story of senior high school students, then

went to teen romance, and so on. Rating ideology as the nature of television industry may cause this phenomenon: when a television station produces a new theme of soap opera and it achieves a high rating, then the other television stations would follow to produce the same theme in order to get high rating (Panjaitan & Iqbal 2006: 46-53; Erdogan 2012: 20). In this context, we understand that religious soap opera is one type of soap opera genres in Indonesia, which was popular between 2004 and 2007.

However, it seems that this genre has its distinctive marker, differentiating itself from other genres of soap opera. In other genres of soap opera, the faithfulness notion is not important at all, both producers and audiences are fully aware that the soap opera is merely a fictional story. However, as I argue, in religious soap opera, the faithful norm is fundamentally important.

4. The relations between function and policies

In the previous study, I have mentioned some basic norms underlying the process of adaptation. Some norms are related to one another in a certain hierarchical relation, in which a certain norm is a more fundamental and determines the other norms (Nazaruddin 2017).

In my opinion, the most fundamental norm is popularity or market preference. It determines the choice of adaptation from popular Islamic-mystic magazines, into soap operas that are also extremely popular. Hence, the media looks at religion, especially Islam, as a marketable commodity. It also means, this is not a matter of Islamic propagation. This conclusion may lead to the thesis of "marketization or commodification of Islam" that has pointed out by many Indonesian experts studying these Islamic soap operas, such as Sasono (2005), Masduki (2006), or Setiawan (2007).

This economic motivation determines two subsequent norms, i.e. the narrative standardization and faithfulness. Hence, we may also regard this basic motif as the dominant, "the focusing component of a work of art: it rules,

determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure” (Jakobson 1981: 751). In the translation or adaptation processes, the dominant determines the aim of translation and provides textual unity (Torop 2000: 88). Here, I use the concept of dominant in a broader meaning, not only in the sense of certain forms or aesthetic functions of art or literary text, as it is originally introduced by Jakobson (1981).

Since the choice of the target text is a soap opera, the narrative pattern follows this choice. The flexible narrative sequence in the magazine should be standardized into the fixed cause-effect narrative structure of soap opera. In this matter, another obvious example is binary opposition norm as the general norm of soap opera. It already exists implicitly in the Islamic-mystic magazines as source texts, but it presents explicitly in a very strong way in the religious soap operas as the adaptation texts. This finding also confirms Lotman’s idea that the principle of binary opposition is the basis for every literature text and work of art, and even for every sphere of human life (Lotman 1975).

The other norm equal with narrative standardization is faithful norm. Many Islamic soap operas have the explicit text during the show, mentioning the story as a real experience adapted from the Islamic-mystic magazine. Besides, the faithful norm also seen very clearly in the appearance of popular *ustad* to open and to close the soap opera with the Islamic teachings.

Carefully observing this norm, we will find slightly different notion of this faithfulness with common understanding in the translation studies, which usually understood as ‘correct’ translation of source text. In this correct translation, the principle of adequacy or equivalence between the adaptation and its original determines the quality of translation (Cattrysse 1992: 60; Torop 2000: 89; Lambert & Robyns 2004: 3601). In the case of religious soap operas, the adequacy principle also seems important, by which they tend to state clearly the

source text and prefer to follow the narrative structure of the source. Furthermore, the functional similarity both of the source texts and target texts as popular-entertainment texts within contemporary Indonesian society is another basis for this adequacy principle (Toury 1994: 1122-1123).

However, in the religious soap operas there are another more important dimensions of this faithfulness, i.e. the conformity with the teachings of Islam, based on a true story, or combination of both (based on a true story and confirm Islamic teaching). Hence, there are some aspects of the faithful norm: adequacy principle, factual principle, and Islamic teaching conformity principle. I suppose this double meaning of faithfulness, refers both to the truthfulness adaptation of the source on the one side, and to the religious teaching and real experience on the other side, is the specific feature of the translation of religious text.

Related to their hierarchical positions, those norms also have different functions. The market preference, as the most basic norm, determines the basic choice of the texts to be translated and overall adaptation strategy, called as preliminary norm. The faithfulness norm, including its three aspects, and narrative standardization norm are the initial norms, regulating the basic translation policies, such as the option between adequacy and acceptability principles. Then, we could say the extreme binary opposition as operational norm, guiding the practice of adaptation in a more detail (Toury 1995).

5. Discussion

We should discuss further, why the faithfulness, especially the factuality and the Islamic teaching conformity principles, are very important in this adaptation processes. In my opinion, this question should be explained through the historical context both of Islamic-mystic magazines and religious soap operas.

Mystical story about the evil, the horrible death, and the supernatural powers of Islamic clerics, actually has deep roots in the

Javanese culture. In ancient Javanese literature from the *Mataram* period, we could find many stories about the unseen world. *Mataram* kingdom leaders, such as Panembahan Senopati, Sultan Agung and Amangkurat, are usually described as someone who holds supernatural powers and could communicate with the unperceivable creatures. For example, in the *Serat Cebolek*, one of the ancient Javanese literatures, there is a story of the fight between Pangeran Mangkubumi against *Menthek* (rice pests), which eventually leads to a number of agreements between them that causing the soil fertility in Java Island (Ricklefs 1998).

Clifford Geertz stated that Javanese people, especially *abangan* group, understand the spirit world as inhabited by *memedi*, *lelembut*, *tuyul*, *demit*, *danyang*, and other kinds of *makhluk alus* (unperceivable creatures). Geertz concluded, “The spirit world is the social world symbolically transformed: the *prijaji* spirits lord it over *abangan* ones, Chinese spirits open stores and exploit the natives, and *santri* spirits will spend their time in praying and thinking up ways to make things difficult for unbelievers” (Geertz 1960: 28). Along with the development of Javanese society, a growing number of forests were opened for housing and agriculture, thus these spirits will move and get out into the wild jungles, the mountain peaks, or the sea. If they disturb people, then Javanese will hold the *slametan*, a Javanese traditional ritual, in order to ask them not to disturb people anymore (Geertz 1960: 14, 28-29; Mulder 2005: 89).

These traditional myths are produced and reproduced in the oral traditions, folklores, literatures, and then modern media, including audio-visual media. The representation of them in the modern audio-visual media has a long history. The mystical horror film genre has emerged since the first generation of film in Indonesia. We could mention some titles from early years of Indonesian film, such as *Onw Peh Tjoa – Doea Siloeman Oeler Poeti en Item* (Two White and Black Snake Ghosts), *Tie Pat Kai Kawin – Siloeman Babi Perang Siloeman Monjet* (The Fight of Pig Ghost against Monkey Ghost), and

Anaknya Siloeman Oeler Poeti (The Son of White Snake Ghost) (Kristanto 2004: 171).

In the 1980s to the beginning 1990s, the mystical horror films were very popular, such as *Sundel Bolong* (the third best-selling movie in 1981), *Nyi Blorong* (first best-selling movie in 1982), *Petualangan Cinta Nyi Blorong – The Love Story of Nyi Blorong* (fourth best-selling movies in 1987), and *Gairah Malam – The Night Desire* (third best-selling movie in 1993) (Kristanto 2004). At this period, an icon of this genre was very popular: Suzanna, a beautiful and sexy artist who always acts as the main character in these films, that is a beautiful and seductive, but deadly female evil, such as *Sundel Bolong* or *Nyi Blorong* (Subanar 2008). In the middle of the 1990s, the mystical horror comics in the stencilled form circulated widely as a popular reading. They talked about the hell or the punishment from God in the grave, such as the sinners who are burned with hot irons, or other kinds of horrible punishments.

Thus, we could conclude that the mystical contents in the Islamic-mystic magazines and the religious soap operas are rooted in the traditional Javanese myths about death, doom, heaven and hell, evil, and *makhluk alus*. We may consider these as a popular Javanese religion.

This historical description, in my opinion, makes a clear theoretical justification to consider the Islamic-mystical magazines and religious soap operas as texts within Javanese culture, also builds an adequate explanation of their functions as texts within their cultural contexts. In the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School, the emphasis of the characteristic of text from its ‘trustworthiness and cultural significance’ is very important (Lotman & Piatigorsky 1978: 239). In this perspective, not every utterance, or even concrete artefact, is text. Only something truthfulness and has certain cultural function could be considered as text. In a written culture, this distinction is related to the ‘oral-written’ differentiation, in which a meaningful thing will be written down, or generally expressed and fixed via certain material forms. According to

Lotman and Piatigorsky (1978: 234), “Not every message is worthy of being written down, but everything written down takes on a particular cultural significance, becomes a *text*”.

Following this quotation, we may say that only the significant or important messages will be translated or adapted. Further, a text should also be understood from “its social role, its capacity to serve certain demands of the community which creates the text” (Lotman & Piatigorsky 1978: 233). The function is point of connection between a text and a wider cultural context, or between addressee and addresser of the text. A certain type of text could fulfil different text functions. In this notion, we may say that for the producers, Islamic soap opera plays an economic function: as a way to get more audiences and more economic profit. But, for the audience, religious soap opera plays a cultural function: as a way to maintain and reconfirm their popular beliefs.

Thus, we may also say that these two functions, namely traditional myth (cultural function) and market orientation (economic function), are the dominants in the production of Islamic-mystic magazines, also the dominant in its adaptation into religious soap operas. The traditional myth, as one of the dominants, underlies cultural practices and generates a language of self-description of Javanese culture. In the macro level, this conclusion leads to the definition of culture as a total translation: there constantly exist the process of translation and self-translation (Torop 2008: 254-255; Torop 2011: 23-24). The old and already existing features, in this case is traditional mystical stories, are communicated and translated continuously with new features or into new forms; this process can be called as self-translation or self-communication. Meanwhile, new features, in this case is soap opera, are translated according to those existing features in order to innovate culture.

6. Conclusion

In this section, I would emphasize some major findings of this study. There are some norms

underlying the adaptation of Islamic-mystic magazines into religious soap operas, which are related to one another in certain hierarchical relation. The most fundamental norm is the popularity or market preference, determining the selection of the source texts. Lower than this market orientation norm, there are two other equal norms, i.e. narrative standardization and faithfulness. Narrative standardization leads the adaptation process to standardize and simplify the narrative structure of the target text according to the narrative pattern of soap opera in general. It creates a more specific norm, namely extreme binary opposition. Meanwhile, faithful norm has three aspects, namely adequacy principle, factual principle, and Islamic teaching conformity principle. This three-aspects of faithfulness is specific features of the translation of religious texts.

The importance of faithful norm is closely related to the deep roots of mystical stories in the traditional Javanese myths about the death, live after death, and *makblus alus*. These traditional beliefs have long history of representations, started from the first generation of mystical film in Indonesia in the 1930s, mystical horror films in the 1980s to the 1990s, mystical comics in the 1990s, and mystical magazines and religious soap operas in the 2000s. This traditional myth, combines with market orientation norm, becomes the dominant in the translation of Islamic-mystic magazines into religious soap operas. It leads us to the theoretical conclusion that this adaptation practice is a mechanism of self-translation of Javanese culture.

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