

Media Transfer from Poetry to Comic: A Visualization of Rendra's Poem "Balada Lelaki-Lelaki Tanah Kapur" to a Comic by Hasmi

Lilawati Kurnia

Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia
lilac1910@gmail.com

Abstract - Two works of Indonesian poet W. S Rendra, namely "Balada Sumilah" and "Balada Lelaki Tanah Kapur"¹ have been rendered into a comic by an Indonesian comic author Hasmi, who is known for his famous work "Gundala, Putra Petir". Comics originating from poetry are unique and not very often seen in Indonesia. The language of poetry has several rules in the literature, when it is diverted into visuals, it certainly experiences significant changes. Due to the rules of this genre, poetry leaves some space or void and poetry has to be interpreted to fill the void or space in poetry. Meanwhile, comics are pictures that have different rules. The comics artist use the void in a poem and fill the void through visualization. Thus, the work derived from a visualization of the poetry has become an entirely new text. This paper will discuss one of the comics and aims to make a research contribution on such visualization process and the shifts it causes.

Keywords: poetry visualization, Rendra's poetry, Hasmi's comic, media transfer

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss the process of rendering a poem by W.S Rendra² into a comic. There have only been a limited number of comics that are derived from poetry works as the researcher concerned. In fact, it was his personal decision that the comic creator Hasmi³ chose to make a comic based on a poetry work of Rendra. The comic, which was issued in the teenage magazine "Hai"⁴, was uniquely Indonesian since the poem was based on tells a story about the struggle of villagers in Bukit Kapur to chase out robbers. The media transfer process put an emphasis on the faithfulness to the original material and the visualization almost looks like illustrations provided for the poem itself. Nonetheless, the visualization derives from an interpretation towards the W.S Rendra's poem and constitutes a new work created by Hasmi because he has interpreted the poem with his own visualization of the story behind it.

Before discussing the said media transfer process, we shall discuss comics as a serious work of art instead of a simple media of entertainment. In addition, comics also constitute subversive visual art products that contain alternative and unique ideas such as those that can be found in various genres of comics, such as science comics, culinary comics, women-oriented comics, history comics, and others.

II. COMICS AND MEDIA TRANSFER

A comic is a visual work that tells a story through a series of images, panels, and words or dialogues written in speech balloons. A panel is a combination of images and words framed together in a single illustration. Although poetry visualization is a common practice in many countries, it is still considered rare in Indonesia since the fields it involves, namely literature and arts, are still deemed as two different fields distinct from each other. Nevertheless, there has been a work created by Hasmi based on a poem by Rendra that is considered as a new original work rather than a mere adaptation. The media transfer process that renders a poem into a comic will be discussed as a process that unites the two fields.

¹Both of these poem are part of an anthology, "Balada Orang-orang Tercinta" which published in 1971 and since then has been many times reprinted.

²W.S Rendra (November 7, 1935, Surakarta- August 6, 2009, Depok), is one of the foremost dramaturg, poet, activist, actor and performer. He has founded Bengkel Theatre in 1967 and performed many works with his artists. Rendra was well known for criticizing Suharto in his work.

³Harya Suratminta known as Hasmi (December 25, 1946, Yogyakarta – November 6, 2016, Yogyakarta), is a comics artist and well known for his works e.g. "Gundala, The Son of Lightning" which consists of 23 books and published between 1969-1982. After the dawn of comics, he started to work as playwright and screenwriter.

⁴"Hai" is a teen magazine in Jakarta, which was very popular during the 80s and 90s. The word "hai" can be translated to "hi". One of its feature was comics and some of its comics writer and artists are well known for their works.

The media transfer process that renders a literary work into another media is commonly found in the form of transferring a novel to celluloid film media, creating an entirely new work. According to Linda Hutcheon (2006: 32), in the adaptation process, an interpretation towards the source medium takes place and a new work is created. This is also supported by DeWitt Bodeen, a media transfer expert who assisted Peter Ustinov in making the scenario for *Billy Budd* movie. Bodeen states, “*Adapting literary works to film is, without doubt, a creative undertaking, but the task requires a kind of selective interpretation, along with the ability to recreate and sustain an established mood*” (McFarlane, 1996: 7). It is considered selective since there are some parts of the original media that are retained and some other parts that are reinterpreted and adjusted to be suitable with the new media. In other words, a movie scenario writer for example, does not simply transfer a literary text into a visual text since to be able to do that, one must go through an interpretation process. Thus, a fidelity approach (an approach observing the faithfulness of adaptation to the source text) is not a relevant approach to apply. In this case, the media transfer from poetry works into comics has its own distinct principles since faithfulness towards the source poetic genre is still deemed important.

In addition, there are different writing styles for each category of literary works. In fact, in one literary work category, one can find various different language styles in accordance with the messages that want to be conveyed by the author. The presentation of a poem is different from the presentation of a comic. Certainly, there have been a lot of studies on W.S. Rendra’s poems, and the ballad that are used as the source material of Hasmi’s comic is included in the book “*Balada Beloved People*” (1993). Several studies on comics have been carried out and will be described below.

A comprehensive study on Indonesian comics has been conducted by Marcel Boneff. In his work, Boneff observed two most-popular Indonesian comic genres, namely battle comics and teenage romance comics. According to Boneff, romance comics are a mirror for social integration. Despite the fact that he mentioned the phrase “social integration”, he only briefly discussed the social context in Indonesia in the 1970s in his work. Boneff also mentioned the relations between comics and capitalistic society, albeit he only mentioned it within the context of the settings of the story, which involve city and the power of money. Since he did not further explore the connection between the entire aspects of the story being studied and the capitalistic society structure, there was no explanation on the connections between personal relationships and the social integration in the context of capitalism. It was Seno Gumira Ajidarma who then succeeded in revealing the existence of such connection.

In terms of urban society representation in comics, Lilawati Kurnia has conducted a study on “Benny dan Mice” comic and written a paper entitled “*Seni Kulinari, Kekuasaan, dan Multikulturalisme dalam ‘Master Cooking Boy’/‘The Real Master Cooking Boy’, Karya Etsushi Ogawa*” issued in the *International Journal Wacana*, which discusses comics in the perspective of multiculturalism. In addition, her book published in 2016, “*Kota Urban Jakarta dalam Komik karya Zaldy*” also discusses the representation of urban lifestyle depicted in Zaldy’s “Kota Urban Jakarta” comic. According to Boneff, the New Order era was the golden era of Indonesian comics, although there were many cases of censorship towards comics. The condition of Jakarta as an urban area in the 1970s was also discussed by Hikmat Darmawan and Seno Gumira Ajidarma. However, both were aware that the limited availability of data sources (corpus) in the form of romance comics prevented them from fully exploring the ideas of urban society and the growth of capitalism in Jakarta.

In the international level, a study on the visual language of comics has been conducted by Scott McCloud, who elaborated the differences between American and Japanese comics. Inevitably, Japanese comics, also called ‘manga’, have found their ways to global audience, and many Indonesian comic makers have adapted the drawing styles of manga. Such phenomena are also discussed by Ajidarma (2000) in his dissertation. McCloud found that the movements between panels in American comics and Japanese comics are connected by their respective artistic characteristics. American comic makers tend to be “goal oriented”, while their Japanese counterparts tend to be “being there getting over there” (Cohn, 2005). Such difference is understandable since each of the works, including the adaptation ones, constitutes a new text that can be studied in a detailed manner. The visual language of comics eventually requires Hasmi to make an independent interpretation towards Rendra’s poem that serve as the source material for his work.

III. MEDIA TRANSFER METHODS

Although adaptations or creations of comic poetry are still rare in Indonesia, they have been quite popular elsewhere. As summarized by Peter Parker (2011), in the last ten years, comic poetry has become a trend especially in the U.K. and one can search for them by using certain keywords such as *graphic narratives*, *visual poem*, and *poem as comics*. In fact, quite a lot of them can be found in special sites for comics. Each keyword has different meaning, for example, ‘graphic poem’ refers to the parallel combination of poetry and visual arts. The result is a visual art with a series of words having the same meaning or impression with the visual art. The poem or the verse itself is more of a part of the visual art, thus it is difficult to determine whether it constitute a literary work or visual art work.

Meanwhile, there is also a similar type of work called ‘visual poem’ or ‘concrete poem’, which also combines visual arts and literary works by making a picture from the words of poetry. An example of this is Reinhard Döhl (1965)’s *Apfel*, meaning ‘apple’ in German, which was written in a way that it took a shape of an apple. Jessica Abel and Matt Madden, two teachers who wrote a book “*Drawing Words and Writing Pictures*”, which contains structured ways or methods to thread words and images to create a comic, also picked up some poems to be converted into comics by maintaining the structure of the poems.

In addition, Dave Moriche, a teacher, artist and illustrator, have published several works such as “Poetry Comics”, “More Poetry Comics”, and “How To Make Poetry Comics”, although they are no longer in the market since they are no longer reprinted. In 2003, Jillian Peters uploaded some visual artworks, which were comicsthat were based on T.S. Eliots’s poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”andin an interview with an online comic magazine on the process of media transferring from a poem, he stated:

I think one of the biggest challenges is staying true to the text and to the image that it spontaneously evokes in me while avoiding an overly obvious, redundant interpretation. In terms of capturing different layers of meaning, I often try to find an image that is a kind of compromise between the various possible interpretations of the text⁵.

In the media transfer process from a poem to a visual work, faithfulness to the original poem is still considered essential and over-interpretation should be avoided. This was applied by Hasmi in rendering Rendra’s poems into comics. However, the stricter form of poems, compared to prose, requires some alterations to be made in their comic versions. As Peters mentioned above, a comic author has to compromise to bring a poem into a comic.

IV. MEDIA TRANSFER PROCESS BY HASMI

As discussed above, faithfulness to the source text still constitutes the method that is used in the media transfer process from poem to comic. This method is used to observe the visualization of the poem throughclose reading. The story in the ballad is a battle of the men of the village. The comic section in “Hai” teen magazineis located in the middle of the magazine and printed in a full A4 page size consisting of 5-6 panels. The number of the panels is usually adjusted with the number of stanzas of the source poem, yet the visualization may also produce a panel that does not refer to any stanza in the source poem. An example of this is shown in the following panel:



The above panel is the first panel in the comic. Through this panel, Hasmi tries to establish the tense atmosphere at the time the robbers surround the villageinBukit Kapur⁶. Although this scene is absent in the poem (see attachment 2), Hasmi included this

⁵<http://comicsalliance.com/comic-books-poetry/>

⁶Bukit Kapur or Limestone Hill, could be found near the city of Bandung. The name itself might be intepreted as a place of hardship and poverty since the people there earn their life by hard working collecting the limestone.

first panel to start his storytelling in order to set up a visual atmosphere. In the poem, this atmosphere is established through a series of words, “*Para lelaki telah keluar di jalanan dengan kilatan-kilatan ujung baja*” (lit. “The men went out to the street with flashing steel edges”), which imply the gravity of the situation to the readers’ mind. The expression “*tanpa menang, tiada kata pulang!*” (lit. “without victory, there is no going home!”) uttered by the Village Chief in this panel is actually written in the third stanza in the poem. In the original material, this expression was continued by “*pelari akan terbujur di halaman, ditolaki bini dan pintu terkunci*” (lit. “deserters shall lie on the yard, refused by [their] wives and locked out [of their houses]”), which implies that any deserter will no longer be accepted even by the person closest to them, namely their own wives. In the comic version, the expression was uttered by the Village Chief, making it to be an invitation or a call to fight until the very end. It is interesting to note that the third stanza of the poem is converted into two to three panels. Apparently this stanza left a deep impression to Hasmi that he even added another illustration as can be seen in the panel below. In the panel, Hasmi drew an illustration of a cowardly man who decided to hide until the battle ended. This scene is absent in the poem, and thus it shows how Hasmi made his own interpretation on the third stanza, by showing a situation where a man refuse to engage in the battle and to die in the battlefield, but he met his end while trying to run away as written in the third stanza of Rendra’s poem.



The following panel also shows Hasmi’s interpretation to the poem in setting up a certain situation and depicting how a human faces a grave danger and the possibility of losing a life. This panel was not based on any stanza in the poem, and it purely a product of Hasmi’s interpretation.



This panel depicts how a man who is expected to be braver than a woman loses his courage to fight the robbers gang. This causes his wife to feel very disappointed towards her husband. Hasmi wanted to include a perspective that not all men are willing to lay down their lives to fight against savagery. In fact, among those seen as heroes, there is also a coward who is afraid of dying. We can also see how Hasmi wanted to set up an atmosphere through a father figure, in the character Village Chief Kudo Seto, who promises his son a proof of victory, as depicted in the panel below. This kind of situation will leave a dramatic impression, and it

is important in the visualization process, not only to impress but also to thicken the plot and to maintain the cohesiveness of the text.



In this scene, the father tries to give words of encouragement to his son, that is by promising him a proof of victory, the father also implies that he will definitely survive the battle against the robbers. This scene cannot be found in Rendra's poem, although the poem ends with a dramatic scene of the father bringing a souvenir from the leader of the robbers in the form of a dagger impaled onto his chest.

Poems tend to leave vacant space that open for interpretations, and they may be filled by certain visualizations as we can see in Hasmi's works. The last scene in the comic, which can be seen below, is also absent in the original poem. The scene depicts a tragic, dramatic end through the illustration of the fallen Village Chief along with the words "*dicintai segenap penduduk Tanah Kapur*" (lit. "loved by all villagers of Tanah Kapur"), which also illustrates the tension established by Hasmi. The Village Chief, the hero of Tanah Kapur, is contrasted with the nameless cowardly character in the previous panel.



V. CONCLUSION

The media transfer process from poetry to comic requires a certain degree of compromise. In his work, Hasmi made this compromise by creating some illustrations which are not purely based on any stanza in the original poem. As a strict literary genre, poetry still retains some vacant rooms that can be filled by reader's interpretation. Hasmi's interpretation towards the source poem is brought forward through some illustrations which do not directly refer to any stanza in the poem. This is done to build a certain atmosphere since the strength of comics lies in their visual aspect, while the strength of poems lies in their verbal aspect. Comic readers typically pay their initial attention to the illustrations before reading the words written on a panel. This is of course entirely different from a poem, and thus a conversion from the verbal aspect of the source poem into a visual aspect of the comic is required. Hasmi's interpretation towards Rendra's poem is conveyed through his independent step in illustrating a certain situation or atmosphere. Hasmi, however, still maintained the original storyline of Rendra's poem, and his interpretation is a form of compromise to build up a dramatic impression in the comic. The media transfer process performed by Hasmi demonstrates his expertise as a talented comic author.

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Attachment 1. Front Cover of "Hai" magazine that contains the comic "Balada Lelaki Tanah Kapur"

Attachment 2. Ballada Lelaki-lelaki Tanah Kapur, A Poem by W.S. Rendra

Para lelaki telah keluar di jalanan
dengan kilatan-kilatan ujung baja
dan kuda-kuda para penyamun
telah tampak di perbukitan kuning
bahasa kini adalah darah.

Di belakang pintu berpalang
tangis kanak-kanak, doa perempuan.

Tanpa menang tiada kata pulang
pelari akan terbujur di halaman
ditolaki bini dan pintu berkunci.

Mendatang derap kuda
dan angin bernyanyi :
- 'Kan kusadap darah lelaki
terbuka guci-guci dada baja
bagai pedagang anggur dermawan
lelaki-lelaki rebah di jalanan
lambung terbuka dengan geram serigala!

O, bulu dada yang riap!
Kebun anggur yang sedap!

Setengah keliling memagar
mendekat derap kuda
lalu terdengar teriak peperangan
dan lelaki hidup dari belati
berlelehan air amis
mulut berbusa dan debu pada luka.

Pada kokok ayam ketiga
dan jingga langit pertama
para lelaki melangkah ke desa
menegak dan berbunga luka-luka
percik-percik merah, dada-dada terbuka.

Berlumur keringat diketuk pintu.
- Siapa itu?
- Lelakimu pulang, perempuan budiman!

Perempuan-perempuan menghambur dari pintu
menjilati luka-luka mereka
dara-dara menembang dan berjengukan
dari jendela.

Lurah Kudo Seto
bagai trembesi bergetah
dengan tenang menapak
seluruh tubuhnya merah.

Sampai di teratak
istri rebah bergantung pada kaki
dan pada anak lelakinya ia berkata:
- Anak lanang yang tunggal!
kubawakan belati kepala penyamun bagimu
ini, tersimpan di daging dada kanan.

(Taken from: <http://arena-puisi.blogspot.com/2016/05/ballada-orang-orang-tercinta-karya-ws.html>)