

**Lost in Translation:
The Politics of Indonesian Literature in International Literary Spaces**

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Article Info	Abstract
<i>Article History:</i> Received 24 March 2025 Approved 12 April 2025 Published 30 April 2025	This study examines the cultural politics affecting Indonesian literature in the global literary arena. It analyses how literary politics, standardisation, implicit agendas, and validation systems impact international reception. The study investigates how global literary standards reshape Indonesian narratives to match international preferences, often at the expense of cultural authenticity. In addition, several works by some prominent Indonesian authors, including Toer, Anwar and Kurniawan are being analysed. Using a descriptive-qualitative approach with discourse analysis, interview and case studies, the research reveals three key findings: translation challenges for Indonesian literary works, limited international publication opportunities, and underrepresentation in global literary awards and criticism. Based on these findings, the study advocates for more inclusive literary practices to enhance Indonesian literature's global visibility while preserving its cultural integrity.
Keywords: Indonesian literature, translation, world literature	

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is renowned for its cultural diversity, historical depth, and linguistic variety. In literature, works by Indonesian authors reflect the nation's complexity and vibrancy. Writers like Alisjahbana, Chairil Anwar, Kurniawan, Chudori, and Paramaditha have created a repository of stories addressing universal themes and regional identities. Despite this richness, Indonesian literature struggles to gain global recognition, primarily due to cultural barriers in the international literary landscape.

One of the notable cultural problems is the translation. The first issue that becomes one of the aspects of translation is the meaning and the equivalence. This includes translating the cultural

terms, involving finding similar terms in the target language (Jakobson, 1959; Ma'shumah & Sajarwa, 2022). Its process consists of the complexity of identity. The complexity is led by the social environment simply because identity is a fluid and transformative product in the society that belongs to the social construction (Barker & Galasinski, 2001; Sajarwa, 2021; Fatin and Cholsy, 2022). An Indonesian example of the cultural translation is *cobek dan muntu*, or *ulekan* in Bahasa Indonesia. The terms may sound unfamiliar to non-Indonesian or non-Asian even though they are translated as mortar and pestle, no matter the forms and materials they are made of.

Another example is the cultural word of *angkringan*. *Angkringan* refers to a pushcart that sells

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food and drinks along the streets in Yogyakarta, Central Java, and East Java. In most translated works, people often translate the word *angkringan* as the food truck or street food truck. However, one thing should be highlighted in that translated word, which is the essence. The essence of Bahasa Indonesia *angkringan* and the English-translated word *food truck* are different, even if it sound similar. In the Indonesian context, *angkringan* is a pushcart mostly made of wood, while in the Western context, a food truck may refer to any food cart, and is not necessarily made of wood as in the Indonesian *angkringan*. The most obvious example is translating the word *nasi* in Bahasa Indonesia. In Indonesian concepts, words like padi refer to the cereal plants that produce rice. When padi is harvested, the unhusked rice or the grain is called *gabah*. When *gabah* is grounded, it will create the rice itself while the finely ground product will be referred as *dedak*. However, in most English translated works, *padi*, *gabah*, and *dedak* are often translated as “rice” which may sound correct but the essence is completely different.

Despite its thematic richness and cultural depth, Indonesian literature faces significant challenges in achieving global recognition. Few Indonesian or ASEAN authors have been nominated for prestigious literary awards such as the Booker, Pulitzer, or Nobel prizes. Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Jose Rizal received nominations, but neither won. Translation remains a major obstacle to internationalizing Indonesian literature. Few Indonesian works have been translated into English, limiting their recognition in world literature. Additionally, international publishers show minimal interest in translating and publishing Indonesian literary works. Beyond translation issues, Indonesian literature suffers from inadequate publication, distribution, and global representation. These works remain largely confined to regional markets, unlike Western, Japanese, or Korean literature. The latter benefit from cultural popularity, extensive publishing infrastructure, and active literary agencies. The weak connections between Indonesian and global publishers further impede accessibility to these works. This reduces opportunities for broader international readership. Moreover, limited financial and institutional support for translation

and marketing makes it difficult for Indonesian literature to enter global literary discourse.

As aforementioned, two main obstacles in globalizing the Indonesian literature from the previous section exist. The first is the translation and the second is the “taste” which draws the publishers’ interest. The interest later leads to the publication, the marketing of the literary products, and the global validation. The global validation or recognition is likely to be seen from the award-given.

Regarding translation, translation in Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (Great Dictionary of Indonesian Language) is a process, method, or act of translating. The translation is a process of re-expressing the message in the source of language into the target language using the closest term either in meaning or language style. In short, it is a transfer process from the source language to the target language as intended by the author (Newmark, 1988; Nida and Taber, 1994). In addition to the definition, it is also important to note that the translation process from the source language to the target language requires a certain communicative skill from the translator. A translator should understand the meaning of the text. The ability is not only supported by the translator’s mastery of the source language. A translator also needs to possess the ability to understand the culture from the source language to the target language.

The research on translation still often focuses on the problems of similarity and equivalence. This certainly raises several questions. Some of them is, “Is the target text equivalent to the source text?” At certain levels, people also question in what context the target equivalent to the source text. Next questions that may raise are the factors which influence the translation process and if there are some differences in the text translation and oral translation.

Translation operates as a complex cultural exchange rather than a simple linguistic conversion. Translation scholars have identified important patterns in how texts are chosen for translation and how they function within their new cultural contexts. As Venuti (2000) notes

“...in a way the target literature selects their source texts, the principle of selection never being uncorrelatable with the home co-systems of the target literature; in the way they adopt specific norms, behaviours, and policies ... which result from their relationship with the other home eco-systems (Venuti, 2000).

From the statement, ones can see that the first characteristic is the fact that the translation is done to give a certain impact to the targeted society. A translator and the parties involved can choose the literary works that will be translated. However, they should always refer to the cultural sources and their essence in the source language. The translation of the word *gabah* into rice in English is the example. The second characteristic is that translation impacts forming cultural change and enriching it through indigenization. It is later what makes the target language becomes dominant. In other words, the translation works which circulate in the cultural system becomes a part of the target society and at the same time, it also strengthens it.

Translation trends reveal the growing global popularity of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese literature in recent years. Korean literary translations have increased significantly, from 8 works in 2001 to 27 in 2019. Similarly, the number of translated titles grew from 14 to 159 during the same period (Levitt and Shim, 2022). Research indicates substantial government support in China, Korea, and Japan for promoting literacy and translating their literature internationally (Levitt and Shim, 2022; Aiying, 2024; Handley, 2025). These governments provide grants for translation initiatives and literary movements to enhance global visibility. In contrast, the Indonesian government shows limited interest in supporting literary translation efforts. This lack of institutional backing challenges Indonesian literature in the global market. Beyond the logistical and financial hurdles of translation, differences in literary preferences also affect international reception.

Publishers typically prioritize award-winning or trending literary works to maximize profit. This aligns with Bourdieu's concept of cultural production, which identifies two distinct fields. The first comprises profit-oriented producers

like large publishers and bestselling authors seeking short-term financial gain. The second is autonomous producers prioritizing artistic merit over economic returns (Bourdieu, 1996; Angelianawati, 2017). In Indonesian literary translation, the commercial approach dominates. Publishers typically invest only in established, award-winning, or popular authors. This publishing tendency relates to broader debates about literary value. Bloom argued that literary works should be judged by artistic merit alone. His former student Greenblatt countered that all literary works carry ideological underpinnings (Bloom, 1998; Barry, 2002; Greenblatt, 2011). These theoretical frameworks help explain ASEAN, to be specific Indonesian literature's limited circulation in global literary markets. Further analysis of these dynamics will follow in the discussion section.

Taking several literary works into consideration and the narratives into the highlight, the focus of this study is to unveil the polemic in translating Indonesian literary works, its (limited) publication, and the underrepresentation of Indonesian literature in global awards as well as the critical recognition. The study later suggested more inclusive literary practices to unrestraint the Indonesian literature's visibility while enhancing the global presence of Indonesian literature. To do so, library, case studies, interviews, and discourse analysis are taken.

METHODS

This research employs a descriptive-qualitative approach to analyze Indonesian literature's global position. Qualitative research prioritizes data depth and quality over quantitative calculations. It explores social or human problems through interpretation (Indriyanto & Angelianawati, 2023). The approach is combined with the case study and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore how the Indonesian literature is being translated, framed, and portrayed globally.

In discourse analysis framework, the research employs Fairclough's (1995) model. This model conceptualises discourses which are shaped by and shaping the social structures. This model suits the research by enabling analysis of linguistic

features in translated texts, as seen in the comparison between Toer's "Bumi Manusia" and its Italian translation. It also allows examination of texts within broader institutional, political, and cultural contexts, revealing the political nature of international book awards.

The analytical and descriptive research methodology uses library study for data collection. Primary sources include critical reviews, articles, essays, and books. These sources are combined with the applicable translators and author to support the argument. As the object of the research, the analysis examines works by prominent Indonesian writers, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Eka Kurniawan, and Chairil Anwar. Translation works by Burton Rafael and other translators provide additional contexts. In addition, the Nobel Prize for literature is taken into consideration as an object of analysis.

The research focuses on three key aspects: the polemical translation process of Indonesian literature, limited publication opportunities, and underrepresentation in global awards and critical recognition. These elements are examined through intellectual history, revealing how theories influence broader cultural developments. The research incorporates relevant statistics, news reports, and scholarly discussions on Indonesian literature and translation studies to ensure accuracy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines the discussion and the findings on how the literary translation can be polemical and complex. It then later examines the limited publication of the Indonesian literary works. The discussion and findings also reveal that the limited publication later leads to the underrepresentation or minimum global recognition towards the Indonesian literary works.

The Polemics in Translating the Indonesian Literary Works

Translation is a complex, often contentious process requiring understanding of both language

and cultural context. Translators inevitably bring their backgrounds and perspectives to their work, sometimes resulting in ideological influences on the final text. The translations of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's works by Max Lane and Harry Aveling demonstrate these differences. Lane, a former Australian diplomat to Indonesia, emphasizes political and ideological elements in his translations. Aveling, an academic scholar, typically focuses more on cultural nuances than political themes. These divergent approaches result in subtly different interpretations of the same source material.

Relating it to the Indonesian translation work, the example can be seen in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Bumi Manusia* Italian translation. In the chapter 18 of *Bumi Manusia*, Bunda tells Minke that a Javanese man is identified as a knight, and a Javanese knight should possess 5 things.

"Lima syarat yang ada pada satria Jawa: wisma, wanita, turangga, kukila dan curiga ...

Pertama wisma, Gus, rumah. Tanpa rumah orang tak mungkin satria. Kedua wanita, Gus, tanpa wanita satria menyalahi kodrat sebagai lelaki. Ketiga turangga. Gus, kuda itu, dia alat yang dapat membawa kau kemana-mana: ilmu, pengetahuan, kemampuan, ketrampilan kebisaan, keahlian, dan akhirnya — kemajuan. Ke empat kukila, burung itu, lambang keindahan, kelangengan, segala yang tak punya hubungan dengan penghidupan, hanya dengan kepuasan batin pribadi. Dan kelima curiga, keris itu, Gus, lambang kewaspadaan, kesiagaan, keperwiraan, alat untuk mempertahankan yang empat sebelumnya. Tanpa keris yang empat akan bubar binasa bila mendapat gangguan..." (*Bumi Manusia*, Toer, 1980, p. 307-308)

The passage is translated in English by Max Lane as;

"The five attributes of the Javanese knight are: house, woman, horse, bird, and keris. Can you remember that? ...

First a house, Gus. Without a house a person can never be a knight... Secondly, a woman, Gus—without a woman, a knight goes against his nature as a man...Third, Gus, a horse. The horse will carry you on your journeys: after learning, knowledge, ability, skills, expertise, and finally—advancement...The fourth, the bird, is a symbol of beauty, of distraction, of everything that has no connection with simple physical survival, of only the satisfaction of one's soul... And the fifth, the keris, Gus, is the symbol of vigilance, preparedness, courage, and the weapon with which to defend the other four. Without the keris, the others will vanish.” (*This Earth of Mankind*, Toer, 1996, p. 311-312)

One thing should be highlighted in both translation is the word *kukila* which is translated as *burung* in Bahasa Indonesia and *bird* in English. This translation refers to the general bird or *burung*. However, in Javanese, the word *kukila* refers to *ingon-ingon* or the kept and singing bird (Septama, 2023). This has shown a fact that there is a slight difference in terms of conceptual aspects.

Another example is the Italian translation of *Bumi Manusia*. In the Italian translated work of *Bumi Manusia*, the passage is translated by Erica Mannucci as:

“ I cinque attribute di un cavaliere giavanese sono: casa, donna, cavallo, pavone e keris.”...

Anziatutto la casa, Gus. Senza una casa una persona non sarà mai un cavaliere...In secondo luogo, la donna, Gus: senza una donna, una cavaliere va contro la sua natura di uomo...Terzo, Gus, un cavalo. Il cavallo ti porter nei tuoi viaggi: alla ricercar del sapere, della conoscenza, delle capacità e delle competenze e infine del progresso...Il quarto, il pavone, e un simbolo di bellezza, di distrazione, di tutto ciò che non è legato alla semplice sopravvivenza fisica, della sola soddisfazione del proprio spirito...e il quinto, il keris, Gus. Il Keris è simbolo della

vigilanza, dell' essere preparati, del coraggio, l'arma con cui difendere gli altri quattro...” (*Questa Terra dell'uomo*, Toer, 1999)

As aforementioned, the word *kukila* is translated as *burung* in general concept in Bahasa Indonesia and as general bird in English. However, the word *kukila* is translated as *pavone* in the Italian translation. One should be aware of this translation because the word *pavone*, as seen in Figure. 1, refers to peacock in English.

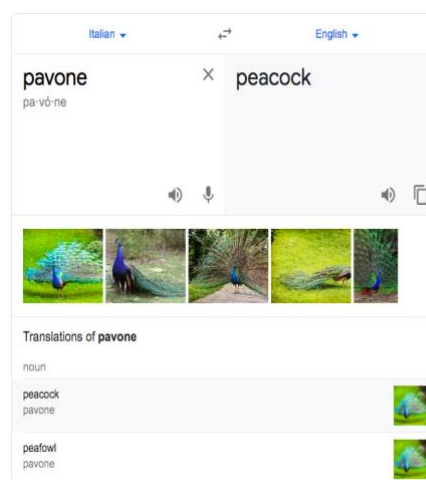


Figure. 1. The translation of *pavone* using Google Translator

In addition, the Italian word bird, referring to bird in the general context, is seen as in Figure 2.

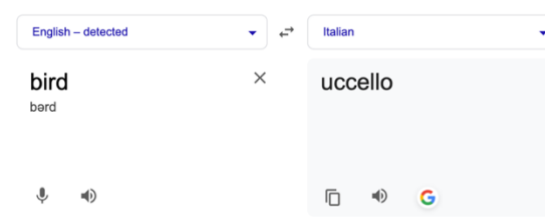


Figure 2. The translation of bird into Italian using Google Translator

As seen in the figures, the translation *kukila* into bird in English has a slight concept, yet the Italian translation of *kukila* into *pavone* carries a huge different in its conceptual aspects. This may also raise questions like; why *pavone* instead of *uccello*? In addition, when it comes to the translation of *bird*, how can the translator connect the concept

of *kukila* as kept bird to *pavone* – peacock, which is completely different?

The most possible answer is that peacock is not only the symbol of paradise and its garden in the Coptic Art but also the symbol of beauty and purity in the Christian era (Habib, n.d.; Tawfik, 2022). The belief of Bestiaries mentions that when the peacock awakes, it cries in fear because of a nightmare shows that his beauty has gone. Thus, the Christian at that particular time believe that the peacock might lose the God-given qualities of his soul (Arthur & Collins, 1913).

The introduction of peacocks from Greece to Rome represented a significant cultural phenomenon in the classical period. In Greco-Roman mythology, these birds held religious importance, closely linked to the goddesses Hera (Greek) and Juno (Roman). They also served as symbols of social status and imperial prestige. During the second century AD, peacocks acquired multiple cultural meanings. The wealthy served peacock meat at lavish banquets. High-ranking military officers decorated their helmets with the bird's colorful feathers. Imperial women adopted peacocks as personal emblems representing both social position and immortality. The evolution of peacocks from exotic imports to cultural icons illustrates the relationship between natural specimens and symbolic meaning in Roman society. (Cooper, 1978; Green, 2006; Kang, 2013; Chapin & Pareja, 2020).

Relating it to the Italian translation of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Bumi Manusia*, the translator may lean towards the Roman belief. With the different geographical conditions, the Italian readers may be unable to relate to *kukila* as *ingon-ingon* or the kept bird. As a result, the Italian translator tries to relate it to the Italian and Roman culture which is more familiar to its readers. Unfortunately, the translated word carries different concepts than the original *kukila* mentioned in Toer's *Bumi Manusia*.

The polemical aspects in the translation words also cover multiple interpretations of a text or passage. In Eka Kurniawan's *Cantik itu Luka*, translated as Beauty is a Wound in English, the Bahasa Indonesia, English and German version

carry similar interpretation. In Bahasa Indonesia, it is written;

“Sore hari di akhir pekan bulan Maret, Dewi Ayu bangkit dari kuburan setelah dua puluh satu tahun kematian.” (Cantik itu Luka, Kurniawan, 2004, p. 1)

In the English version, the passage is translated by Anne Tucker as;

“ONE AFTERNOON ON a weekend in March, Dewi Ayu rose from her grave after being dead for twenty-one years.” (Beauty is a Wound, Kurniawan & Tucker, 2015, p.1)

Meanwhile, in German edition, the passage is translated by Sabine Müller as;

“An einem Wochenendnachmittag un Närz und einundzwanzig Jahre nach ihrem Tod erhob sich Dewi Ayu aus ihrem Grab.” (Schönheit ist eine Wunde, Kurniawan & Müller, 2019, p.1)

The German version can be translated as; “On a weekend afternoon, during March and 21 years after her death, Dewi Ayu rose from her grave.” Thus, one can see that in the English and German translated, they refer to one interpretation of text: one evening on a weekend in March, somebody named Dewi Ayu rose from her grave after being dead for twenty-one years.

Using the German translation and contrasting it to Chairil Anwar's translated work of *Aku*. The translation of, “... aku mau hidup seribu tahun lagi..” in the poem *Aku* by Burton Raffel is, “I want to live another thousand years...” (Raffel, 1988; Anwar, 2003). Meanwhile, the German translation is, “Leben will ich noch tausend jahre...” (Karwath, 1978; Anwar, 2003). The German translation can be literary translated as “thousand years again, I want to live.” The essence of these two translated works is different.

The passage highlights that *Aku*, who is still alive, wants to live another thousand years. This essence is accordance to the English translated work by Burton Raffel, in which, this *Aku* who is still alive and still has the will to live for another thousand years. Meanwhile the German translation can be interpreted differently. In the German version, the *Aku* can be interpreted as one who has already died and want to revive in the next thousand years.

These arguments show that an inevitable fact that translation comes with its complexity. It covers almost all aspects like cultural and ideological which tend to be different from the source language to the target language. The best alternative a translator can do is to find the word in the target language which carries the closest meaning to the source language. This opinion is strengthened by Ronny Agustinus, an Indonesian translator focusing on translating Spanish and South American literature to Bahasa Indonesia. During a personal interview with Agustinus, the authors find out that;

“Salah satu bagian tersulit (buat saya) dalam menerjemahkan fiksi adalah soal nama. Tentu yang saya maksud adalah nama panggilan, julukan, dsb. Membiarkannya sebagaimana adanya tentu adalah cara termudah, tetapi akan “tidak bunyi” di bahasa terjemahan, padahal julukan itu punya arti bagi karakter si tokoh. Misalnya, dalam “Tuan Presiden”-nya Asturias, nama “Patahueca” saya terjemahkan jadi “Dengkulkopong”

Begitu juga di buku anak-anak yang tampak mudah macam “Kisah Seekor Camar” ini. Tokoh kucing intelektual pembaca ensiklopedia di buku ini aslinya bernama “Sabelotodo” yang bisa berkonotasi positif “serba tahu” atau agak negatif “sok tahu”. Membiarkannya sebagaimana adanya akan tidak bunyi buat pembaca Indonesia. Bagaimana solusinya? Untuk mencari ilham, saya melihat bagaimana edisi-edisi bahasa lain menerjemahkan nama ini. Edisi Italianya—buku ini sangat terkenal di Italia

dan bahkan difilmkan di sana, karena itu edisi Italianya yang pertama kali saya rujuk untuk cari tahu—memakai nama “Diderot” untuk tokoh si kucing pintar itu. Denis Diderot, kita tahu, adalah filsuf Prancis penyusun apa yang nantinya dikenal sebagai ensiklopedia modern. Nama ini memang “bunyi sekali” untuk konteks Italia dan Eropa umumnya, anak-anak di sana pasti pernah belajar soal Diderot, tapi untuk Indonesia, saya sangat ragu. Saya lalu menengok ke edisi Inggris yang ternyata menggunakan nama “Einstein”—nama yang seperti sudah menjadi representasi universal dari orang pintar. Akhirnya, saya putuskan tidak menggunakan nama spesifik, tapi julukan generik yang banyak dipakai di Indonesia untuk menyebut orang yang dianggap sangat pintar: “Profesor”.

Demikian juga tokoh si kucing pelaut yang aslinya bernama “Barlovento” (yang berarti “arah angin bertiup”). Edisi Inggrisnya memakai nama “Seven Seas”. Mengingat bahwa huruf v dibaca menyerupai b dalam bahasa Spanyol, maka saya menduga perulangan bunyi s dalam “Seven Seas” hendak menyamai perulangan bunyi b dalam “Barlovento”. Karena itulah, dengan segala risiko akan terdengar sangat nJawani, saya memilih perulangan b juga dengan memberinya nama “Banyubiru” (Agustinus, personal communication, 19 August 2022).

(One of the hardest parts (for me) in translating fiction is dealing with names. Of course, I mean nicknames, epithets, etc. Leaving them as they are certainly the easiest approach, but they would not ‘sound right’ in the target language, even though these nicknames hold significance for the character. For example, in Asturias’ *Mr. President*, the name ‘Patahueca’ was translated as ‘Dengkulkopong’...

The same challenge applies to easy children's books, like *The Story of a Seagull*. The intellectual cat who reads

encyclopaedias in this book is originally named ‘Sabelotodo,’ which can have a positive connotation (‘all-knowing’) or a slightly negative one (‘know-it-all’). Keeping it as is would not resonate with Indonesian readers. So, what is the solution? I looked at how other language editions translated this name to find inspiration. The Italian edition—this book is very popular in Italy and was made into a film, so I referred to the Italian version first—uses the name ‘Diderot’ for the intelligent cat. As we know, Denis Diderot was a French philosopher who compiled what later became known as the modern encyclopaedia. This name fits perfectly in the Italian and broader European context, as children there are likely familiar with Diderot, but for Indonesia, I was doubtful. Then I checked the English edition, which uses the name ‘Einstein’—a name almost universally synonymous with intelligence. Ultimately, I decided not to use a specific name, but a generic title commonly used in Indonesia to refer to someone considered highly intelligent: ‘Professor.’

Similarly, the sailor cat character was originally named ‘Barlovento’ (meaning ‘windward’). The English edition uses ‘Seven Seas.’ Since the letter ‘v’ in Spanish is pronounced similarly to ‘b,’ I suspected that the repetition of ‘s’ in ‘Seven Seas’ was meant to match the repetition of ‘b’ in ‘Barlovento.’ Therefore, despite the risk of it sounding very Javanese, I opted for a similar ‘b’ repetition and named the character ‘Banyubiru.’)”

Indonesian literary works present unique translation challenges due to their cultural, historical, and linguistic complexities. Translators must select the closest meaning in the target language when confronting phrases with layered meanings. This complexity intensifies in Indonesian literature where local idioms, historical contexts, and regional dialects shape narratives. Literary works by Anwar and Toer contain

indigenous worldviews and political commentary that resist simple translation. The difficulty extends beyond vocabulary to preserving the original spirit without misinterpretation. Translation controversies demonstrate that language comprises more than words—it embodies identity, memory, and evolving meaning.

The Limited Circulation of Indonesian Literary Works in the Global Arena

Translation difficulties contribute to Indonesian literature's limited global reach. Unlike Japanese and Korean literature, which has shown significant circulation growth (Shafi, 2024; Short, 2025), Indonesian works struggle to find international audiences. This limited presence stems from three main challenges: insufficient translated works, restricted access to international publishers, and financial limitations. These barriers collectively hinder Indonesian literature from achieving the global recognition it deserves.

The translation challenges for Indonesian fiction limit international readership. Unlike Japan, Korea, China, and other countries with established literary networks, Indonesia suffers from insufficient high-quality translations. This deficiency stems from inadequate funding and lack of strategic initiatives. While works by Toer, Kurniawan, and Paramaditha have appeared in foreign languages, translation efforts remain sporadic and uncoordinated. No structured programs exist specifically for promoting Indonesian literature internationally. The absence of coordinated action among government agencies, cultural institutions, and literary organizations prevents allocating necessary resources for professional translation services.

Another major issue is the high cost of translation, publication, and marketing. To translate a literary work, an author is often urged to find a reputable and skilled translator. In securing a skilled translator, the process is further complicated by the urges for cultural or contextual accuracy. The purpose of to maintain its original essence. This certainly comes at a significant cost.

“Salah satu bukuku kemarin mau diterjemahkan dalam Bahasa Inggris oleh Pak John McGlynn dan pas dihitung kemarin *cost*-nya hampir 80 jutaan.” (Basri, personal communication, 16 May 2021)

(One of my books was supposed to be translated into English by John McGlynn, and when the cost was calculated, it turned out to be nearly 80 million Indonesian rupiahs)

A personal interview with an Indonesian author, Nuril Basri highlights the financial burden associated with the translation. Basri revealed that the translation cost for one of his books was estimated at nearly 80 million rupiahs, considered a significant sum that many Indonesian author or small publishers cannot afford. This also shows a notable important fact regarding translation: translating literary works, especially fiction, requires more than linguistic accuracy. It demands sensitivity to the original meaning and tone of the work, ensuring that the translation in the target language remains as authentic and engaging as the source language. Thus, a skilled translator who comes at high cost is required not only to understand both languages fluently but also to grasp the cultural and contextual aspects of the targeted texts.

Apart from the complex and costly translation process, one also needs to see this issue from the publisher side. The publisher will have to consider the royalty and the purchase of rights for a book to be translated. These points also come with certain costs.

“Sebenarnya prinsipnya sama saja sistem ini royalti. Tapi kalau penulis lokal umumnya 10%, terjemahan umumnya 6-8% karena 2-4%*nay* diasumsikan untuk terjemahan (besaran ini bisa dinego). Jadi akan ditanya harga jual berapa dan cetakan pertamamu berapa. Misal cetak 2000 harga jual IDR80.000 royalti 8%. Andai terjual ludes, kan penulis akan dapat IDR 12.800.000 alias kurang lebih US\$800 (kurs anggap IDR 16.000). Nah dari \$800 itu dinego DP nya

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(It is the same. The principle is the same – the system is based on royalties. However, for the local authors, the royalty rate is typically 10%, while for the translated works, it is usually 6-8% because 2- 4% is assumed to cover translation costs (this percentage is negotiable). So, the publisher (of the author whose work being translated) will ask about the selling price and the initial print run. For example, if the first print run is 2,000 copies and the selling price is IDR. 80,000 with an 8% royalty rate, the author would receive 12,800,000, approximately USD 800 (assuming an exchange rate of IDR 16,000 per USD). From that USD 800, the advance payment (deposit/DP) is then negotiated)

Finding skilled translators is expensive, and publishers must also pay for royalties and rights acquisition. Before translation begins, significant costs accumulate—including production, printing, editing, and marketing expenses. If the translated book fails to achieve bestseller status, publishers face a critical financial question: how will they recover these substantial investments? Consequently, publishers become highly selective about which Indonesian literary works they translate and promote internationally. This economic reality creates another barrier to global circulation of Indonesian literature.

“Sekarang kami hanya fokus ke *selling*. Penting biaya produksi ketutup. Karena

kami pernah dulu nerjemahin salah satu karya sastra Thailand, kan? Sudah kami harus bayar royalti yang lumayan, cari penerjemah Thailand-Indonesia yang mumpuni juga susah. Adapun itu dapatnya mahal. Bukunya juga ternyata nggak diterima bagus di pasaran. Jadi sekarang kami lebih selektif lagi dalam memilih buku (untuk diterjemahkan dan diterbitkan).” (Setiawan, personal communication, 17 June 2023)

(We are now focusing on selling. It is important for us that the production cost are covered. We once translated a Thai literary work, right? We had to pay a considerable royalty fee, and finding a skilled Thai-Indonesian translator was difficult. On the top of that, the cost was high. Unfortunately, the book did not perform well in the market. So now, we are being more selective in choosing book to translate and publish.”

Major publishers rarely focus on literature from South America, Africa, or ASEAN countries, including Indonesia. Instead, they prioritize commercially successful Japanese and Korean translations. In Indonesia, Penerbit Haru and Penerbit Koru exemplify this trend by focusing exclusively on popular Korean and Japanese works. The small publisher Marjin Kiri, led by Ronny Agustinus, leads translation efforts for Latin American literature. Heinemann once published African and ASEAN literature but has reduced these offerings annually. UK-based Tilted Axis Press specializes in Asian literature, having published translations of Indonesian poets Norman Pasaribu and Khairani Barokka. Lontar Foundation remains dedicated to promoting Indonesian literature globally. However, both Tilted Axis and Lontar operate with limited funding, significantly restricting the number of Indonesian works translated (Erviani & Widiadana, 2012; Spanoudi, 2024).

The Underrepresented Indonesian Literature in Global Awards and the Critical Recognition

One of the highest achievements of an Asian author gaining a global award was when Han Kang, a Korean writer won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2024. The euphoria lasted for a while, leading a massive, reprinted publication on Han Kang's books. Between 1901 and 2024, few Asian writers received this prestigious award, raising questions about representation in global literary recognition. This underrepresentation becomes more complex when considering definitions of "Asian" identity. Should we categorize by ethnicity or birthplace? Authors like Gao Xingjian (Chinese French) and Kazuo Ishiguro (Japanese-British) complicate these categories. Given Turkey's geographical position between Asia and Europe, similar questions arise about Orhan Pamuk. Beyond identity questions, critical assessment of literary awards should examine their standardization, validation processes, and potential political motivations.

The Nobel Peace Prize often generates political controversy, as two notable cases demonstrate. Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi received the award in 1991 for her democracy advocacy, but her later handling of Rohingya violence sparked debates about revoking her prize (Beaumont, 2012; Fouche, 2018; Cuvelier, 2019). Similarly, Barack Obama's 2009 Nobel Peace Prize created controversy. Former Nobel Committee Secretary Geir Lundestad later acknowledged criticisms that Obama lacked sufficient accomplishments to merit this recognition (n.a., 2009; n.a., 2015). These controversies reveal the political nature of Nobel awards and raise important questions about similar dynamics in literary prizes. How might political considerations influence Nobel Literature Prize selections and recognition of works from countries like Indonesia?

One of the requirements for an author to be considered for the Nobel Prize or other global literary awards is that their works need to be accessible to the Swedish Academy and other awarding bodies. The candidates eligible for the literature prize are those qualified persons whom the Nobel Committee invite to submit names for nominations. In addition, those qualified to

nominate but have not invited may also submit their nomination, yet no one can nominate himself or herself. These people will have to go to certain stages as shown in Figure. 3;

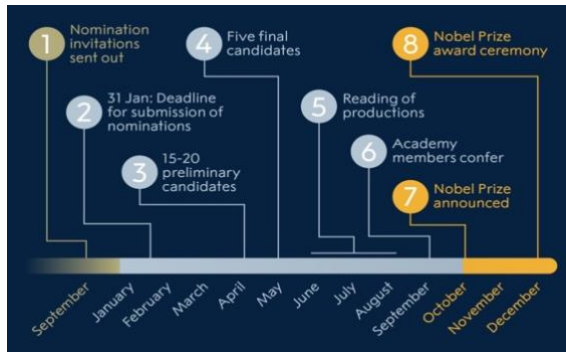


Figure 3. The nomination process for Nobel Prize laureates in Literature (n.a, 2015)

Through those stages, one can see that there is an involvement of the committee, contain people with various taste in literature. The problem is these people in the committee are primarily read in English, French, German, or other dominant languages. Thus, their judgment of non-western literary works like Indonesian ones will be questionable. It is especially if those non-western literary works are not yet translated into the dominant languages used by the committee members.

Indonesian literature remains underrepresented in Western-dominated literary circles despite its rich narrative traditions. While some Indonesian authors have received PEN Awards or Booker Prize nominations, these recognitions remain scarce. Pramoedya Ananta Toer received multiple Nobel Prize nominations without winning—suggesting factors beyond literary merit affect recognition. Translations of works by Umar Kayyam, Chudori, Kurniawan, Pasaribu, and Paramaditha depend primarily on individual translators or small publishers rather than systematic government initiatives. Global literary awards often prefer narratives aligning with Western values or exoticized portrayals of non-Western cultures. This preference disadvantages writers like Kayyam and Toer, whose works critique colonialism and social injustice in Indonesia.

The limited global recognition of Indonesian literature reflects intersecting political, economic, and cultural barriers. High translation costs, insufficient funding, and questionable evaluation standards create significant obstacles. Addressing these challenges requires expanded translation initiatives, international partnerships, and sustainable funding mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

Despite its rich socio-political and historical narratives, Indonesian literature remains underrepresented in the global literary arena. The primary obstacles to international recognition include translation challenges, limited circulation, and insufficient promotional support.

High translation costs and minimal backing from literary enthusiasts, government agencies, and publishers restrict access to wider audiences. Consequently, Indonesian literary works have less visibility than those from established literary markets like Japan, Korea, and China. Global literary awards typically favor narratives aligned with Western values and perspectives. This tendency often sidelines Indonesian works that critique colonialism or address local socio-political and historical issues. The resulting imbalance perpetuates the marginalization of Indonesian literature in international discourse.

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