

FINDING THE TRANSCENDENTAL BEAST IN POETIC TRANSLATIONS OF CHAIRIL ANWAR'S AKU

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ABSTRACT

This study sets out to present the combined application of qualitative research and a translation method to elucidate the transcendental aspect of Chairil Anwar's poem entitled *Aku*. The translation process uses the poem's verbatim format at first, then its interpretation of the content, and finally its inherent ideas by reading behind its lines. The transcending process is achieved through the use of a symbolic beast that permeates the poem's structure. The beast-symbol has twofold functions in the poem, to say that everything beyond the persona-self is unworthy and thus the persona itself is capable of reaching a more divine place or becoming a higher being. Such a powerful symbol further substantiates the presence of a textual being, a voice of a persona that is inherent within the poem's structure, and of which function is to express the persona's wish to transcend into something bigger or higher than himself, which is resembling, if not equal to, a godly being.

Keywords: poem's persona, poetic translation, transcendentalism.

INTRODUCTION

Poems are some of the oldest arts, with their literary history dating back to the Ancient Greeks (Mays, 2019). Yet despite its apparent antiquity, poems continue to be one of the major literary expressions (Klarer, 1999) and many scholars believe that poetry may be even older than other arts due to its very close proximity to oral traditions and language, hence strongly suggesting that this form of art predates any inventions of writing systems (Beissinger, 2012). This is evidenced by various poetic expressions which have transformed and become embedded in many ancient cultures as a significant part of their lives such as charms, spells, mantras, and others that were considered to be sacred expressions. Interestingly, with the growth of civilization, such poetic function does not cease but even spreads further crossing the boundaries of the religious realm. Hence,

modern societies enjoy romantic, feastful, and even educational poems, just to name some common functions of poetry nowadays.

The same poetic development also takes place in Indonesia. Our societies have long been captivated by the existing *tembang* and *pantun* or *gurindam*, both as a form of entertainment and religious, or even sacred, expressions. With the start of the Colonialism era, many poems continue to evolve to have more practical functions such as expressing the spirit of liberty, encouraging the readers to be up in arms and defend their nation, or promoting the idea of independence (Saptoyo, 2020). It is in this context that one of the Indonesian poets, Chairil Anwar, rose to popularity and gained fame throughout the nation's (poetic) history. Born in 1922 and died in 1949, Anwar grew up during the so-called Revolutionary period where he matured his poetic ability by creating an estimated 96 works, some of which include 70 pieces of individual poems. It is no wonder then that he is regarded as one of the pioneering poets that were historically known as Angkatan '45 (Adryamarthanino, 2022).

Not stopping that far, the poem continues to play its part as one of the most important Indonesian literary works up to this day. Indeed, among the 70 individual poems that Chairil Anwar wrote, *Aku* stands out and immortalizes his name since it was written in 1943. One reason for this is due to the fact that the poem is still selected and continued to be used as part of school materials, such as in the textbook of *Bahasa Indonesia untuk SMP/MTs* (Kemendikbud, 2017), where it will always be read and learned by millions of Indonesian students. Anwar's poems are often celebrated and reinterpreted in various academic as well as non-academic discourses. One of the best examples of the latter is the reprint of the poem in *Wall Poems in Leiden* (Khouw, 2001) where the poem was reproduced in its original Bahasa Indonesia. Another popular interpretation can be found in the form of media production in which discussions about the poem and or its author are usually reprinted and circulated in daily news such as "*Mengenal Puisi Aku Chairil Anwar*" (Putri, 2022) and "*Puisi Aku Karya Chairil Anwar*" (Adil, 2021). All these interpretations, at least, hint at some evidence that the poem can be regarded as one of the most celebrated poems in today's Indonesian or even international society. Despite various news outlets that take the liberty of publishing this topic, most of these news articles concentrate on the poem as carrying a similar message, i.e., a sense of liberation, most likely due to its time-creation during Japanese colonialism. Hence the poem contains ideas that encourage the readers to be brave, patriotic, steadfast, loyal, or even relentless. This is a common interpretation that can be found in many newspaper articles.

For more academic reviews, a similar tendency can also be noticed as some of the analyses always show the tendency to establish a correlation between the poem and its author. For example, Netty's study (2011) zeroed in on the nature of the poem, but the analysis is more related to the author's personality. She further argued that the poem emphasized Anwar's individualistic nature, reflecting his need to control his environment and not be shaped by external forces. Through controlling his environment, Anwar was able to better protect his freedom and individualistic nature, surmising that Anwar would have agreed with Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism. In another study, Budiman (2007) stated that the poem reflected Anwar's worldview, that others should not care about him as he did not care about them either. It was supported by the third and fourth stanzas reflecting Nietzsche's view that suffering made one stronger.

Both studies above similarly stressed the author's intention or personality, thus making the poem a reflection of what the author had to say. More recent interpretations were written by Ningrum et al (2020) and Iriany & Tenriana (2022) which focused on the intrinsic elements of the poem. Their conclusion makes it clear that the poem's message is that one must strive to get their wishes. Being resilient during hard times and having a high spirit to achieve their purpose in life.

All popular and academic attempts to interpret Chairil Anwar's *Aku* as quoted above, interestingly, exhibit a common trend, i.e., the poem, or even the poet, seems to represent a different voice which is more practical in its function. This voice seems to come from society or the nation that uses the poem as a tool to spread its own didactic agenda in teaching good things for society. Such interpretation cannot be deemed wrong as different readers may have a diversity of findings when making sense of any literary works according to their own backgrounds and or purposes. This trend is also what interests us to look at or provide alternative reading for the poem since so far there has been very little scholastic discussion that attempts to present a more "selfish" reading or interpretation of the poem such as from the perspective of formalism. In that, the poem is a unique entity having nothing to do with the author, and the persona is the intrinsic voice or ego which wants to excel, not for the sake of its nation or society, but exactly of itself.

There seems to be no analysis that centers *Aku* in the realm of transcendentalism, that is, a study that sees the poem in a new light, i.e., making it much more personal by the voice of its own persona. What it means is the previous studies mostly make the poem as having a societal or authorial function; that of voicing the community such as the symbol of the spirit of revolution or the author's personal intention. This study attempts to put

Chairil Anwar's poem, *Aku*, in its own voice by showing that the persona in the poem is hoping to transcend itself, rather than being a representative of its society.

The effort in transcendental reading has twofold importance; firstly, to make room for the poem to 'speak for itself', hence providing sample analysis on how to read or interpret poems in general, and secondly, to help provide evidence that any literary text is open to interpretations, proving that none of those interpretative attempts is better than the other. Instead, each and any reading of literary works should give nothing but enrichment of ideas that could help educate our society better.

METHODS

This study is qualitative in nature as it is aimed to give an in-depth description of human expressions. The writers collect and analyze non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences and to get insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007; Cohen et al., 2017; Given, 2008). Here the writers use formal criticism to analyze *Aku*, a poem written by Chairil Anwar, to specifically emphasize the inherent structure of the poem.

The theory is chosen since formalism itself is a form of literary criticism that focuses on a text's use of structure (Guerin, et.al., 2005). It would analyze the use of grammar, word choice, syntax, and how all the elements work together. This theoretical platform enables interpretation that is solely based on what the intrinsic elements of the poem say, all the while keeping at bay whatever voices of the author or even society have to the poem.

Formal criticism also treats a poem as a unique, independent entity, a work unto itself, not attached to outside concerns such as its author or the society where it was produced (Guerin, et.al., 2005). In this way, the poem, as a text, can have its own voice, thus necessitating the presence of an agent, a textual being, that delivers such a voice. This textual presence of the agent is often called the persona of the poem, or a dramatic character, distinguished from the poet, who is the speaker of a poem.

In order to better understand the topic of the persona in Chairil Anwar's *Aku*, a specific philosophical approach of transcendentalism is used to explain the persona's function in the poem, especially the thoughts of Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1841 essay, *The Over-Soul*. Emerson believes the presence of "higher soul" is attainable and possible since "the soul is the perceiver and revealer of truth. We know truth when we see it, let skeptic and scoffer say what they choose" (p. 9).

From such a conception, it can be inferred that Emerson, and many other transcendentalists, become strong believers in the power of the individual, rather than the community. In fact, many proponents of this philosophy downgrade society and its institution, especially any of its organized parties such as in religions and or politics. They believe that these institutions may corrupt an individual's soul as Emerson puts in his essay, "All are conscious of attaining a higher self-possession. It shines for all. There is a certain wisdom of humanity that is common to the greatest men with the lowest, and which our ordinary education often labors to silence and obstruct. The mind is one, and the best minds, who love truth for its own sake, think much less of property in truth" (p. 8).

Little wonder that transcendentalists firmly believe that people will be at their finest if they are self-reliant and independent, thus opening the chance for every individual to do their best (become higher). Emerson calls this process 'revelation' as he explains, "We distinguish the announcements of the soul, its manifestations of its own nature, by the term Revelation... The nature of these revelations is the same; they are perceptions of the absolute law. They are solutions of the soul's own questions" (pp. 10-11).

From this revelation, all souls should then aim even higher to be that of what Emerson calls 'Over-Soul' that is the 'one-soul' that unites all people as one being, "Souls such as these treat you as gods would; walk as gods in the earth, accepting without any admiration your wit, your bounty, your virtue even... Souls like these make us feel that sincerity is more excellent than flattery. Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God; yet for ever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable" (pp. 15-16).

For the sake of this article. such very existence of the "universal self", that is the self that unites with the greater Being, is what this study wants to prove as it emerges in the poetic translation of Anwar's *Aku*. This is because this study believes that the transcendental idea which is imbued in the poem can only be shown by translating each line into English as the language employs the tenses that explicitly reflect the ideas of past, present, and future. Hence, emphasizing the persona's wish to elevate itself as a being in the past and present, into that of a higher one in the future.

Furthermore, the translation was done in three different versions or in a three-step translation process. The first step started with translating the poem as literally as possible in order to present the raw form of the poem's formation. The second step captured the structural idea of the poem in order to provide evidence of a transcendental thought

inherent in the poem. The last translation step used a free-interpretation technique to showcase the fact that such transcendental thought was indeed what the persona of the poem really wished to speak for. This whole process was needed to show that the closer the poem became idealistic, the stronger the persona's wish to transcend into a higher being.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

As stated in the background, while there has been a substantial number of previous studies on Chairil Anwar's *Aku*, there is indeed a need for a systematic analysis of the poem which gives readers an alternative way of understanding it from the perspectives of transcendentalism. To start with, the full poem is given below.

Aku (by Chairil Anwar)
Kalau sampai waktuku
Ku mau tak seorang 'kan merayu

Tidak juga kau
Tak perlu sedu sedan itu

Aku ini binatang jalang
Dari kumpulannya terbuang

Biar peluru menembus kulitku
Aku tetap meradang menerjang

Luka dan bisa kubawa berlari
Berlari
Hingga hilang pedih peri

Dan aku akan lebih tidak peduli
Aku mau hidup seribu tahun lagi!

The poem is composed in 13 lines of free-rhyme style. This means that each line is not attached to any certain procedures or metrical rules such as assonances or footage. The poem does, though, have some sound-repeats at the end of certain lines. However, this repetition does not evoke certain audio patterns such as those commonly found in traditional poems such as ballads, couplets, or the Indonesian "pantun" and or "gurindam".

The first line of the poem starts with if-hypothesis. The Indonesian 'kalau' means the persona has started thinking a while ago and hasn't yet finished with its thought at the moment the poem is uttered. This future reference in "kalau" is important as it sets the whole context of the poem, making it a reference for the future or, in our contemporary term: it sets its vision.

This vision is none of those so-called empty prophecies nor dreams. The next part of the line tells clearly that it is more of a promise, an ideal that the persona is trying to attain, no matter what happens or will be happening later. The first line of the poem therefore serves as the fundamental foundation of the whole poem-structure: an initial point of transcending the persona's soul to the future. The overall structure can thus be concluded as the persona's oath: *Whenever my time is due, I'll see to it in my future.*

The second line is more of a declaration: I want no one to disturb or seduce me. This statement is a continuation from the first line expressing the strong wish, which is also the soul of the poem, "if later." In this line lies also the noteworthy salient point: the soul's desperate wish to be left completely alone. So strong is the soul's craving for some fundamental solitude that the readers can sense some implicit threat: *"Stay away from me, or else..."*

The third line continues the second, only it becomes much more personal here. The line explicitly mentions someone "you" that can only be in close relation to the lyrical-I. Already in this third line, the wish, the want to be left alone and the threat in the sub-text get clearer and stronger. The phrase "not even" serves as an amplifier of the poem's soul, i.e., the solid wish, that all humans, including the one that is probably closest or dearest, shall not disturb nor seduce the persona.

The fourth line is interesting since it presents a structural double-entry. As a continuation of the first three lines, the "no need" phrase in the initial part of the line reaffirms what the persona wishes to speak or deliver in all of the previous lines: a cut off from any relations to all or even anything humans. But as the cue for the next part of the poem, this fourth line heralds a new topic that signals another presence, an alien or outlandish creature whose origin or personal allegiance is obscure, in order to necessarily explain the persona's wish to cut itself off from anything humane.

As previously introduced, the fifth line is probably the most enigmatic statement in the poem. The term 'jalang' is used to describe 'animal' here, making the reference into an untamed or wild beast. This metaphor transforms and clarifies the upcoming 'strangeness' signaled in the fourth line. The persona equates itself with wild beast both physically and mentally, as if amplifying the statement that it is no longer human. In this sense, the line also becomes the next continuation of the first line which is the poem's soul itself: *When my time comes, I am but a wild beast.* The second to the fourth lines serve as modifiers for this idea: the persona has transformed into some kind of beast that defies human coexistence – even the dearest one is now outlawed. This 'wild beast' also

matches the sub-text of threat delivered in the second line: disturbing untrammelled wilderness is a risky business.

The idea of an untamed beast is further strengthened in the sixth line. There is a good hyperbaton that jumbles the order of sentence here: by mentioning “*dari kumpulannya*”, that is the adverb of place providing original belonging, family, gathering, the line creates a ‘chopping-ax effect’ where the most important element will only be given at the end of the sentence: the persona is actually a beast that has been outstripped, alienated, or outcast from, or even by, its own family.

The seventh line can state the challenge here. That “*biar*” in Bahasa Indonesia is much similar with the English expression like “*come what may for I’m ready for it.*” Thus, the line here is closer to say, I don’t care even if the bullets keep piercing my skin. What matters here is to notice that the persona is ready for the consequence, for it already foresees the future outcome of this present event: even if there are raining bullets before me, just keep them coming for I will see none of them.

The response to the persona’s readiness to cope with adverse consequences mentioned in the previous line is stated in the eighth line. Again, the persona uses a word that expresses continuity or full presence of mind to react. The Indonesian “*tetap*” carries similar sense with the English “*always*” or “*forever*”, thus the translation I’ll keep moving while forever infuriated. But then, the persona does this in order to achieve its personal goal. In this light, the translation may also be *I am forever vengeful while I keep moving to achieve my goal.*

The ninth line of the poem restates the full presence of mind that the persona already makes clear in the previous line. It is worth noting now, the persona adds the whole effects of that raining bullets in seventh line: wounds and poisons. The strong “*beast*” inside the persona also states that it will take all of those consequences – no matter how painful it could be. This is the same as saying that the persona will not evade all kinds of pain, instead it will keep on running heedless of any pain. This line is significant because it presents a resemblance to the Biblical story of crucifixion, especially the scene of “the bearer of the cross” when Jesus walked and carried His own cross upward to Golgotha.

The tenth line consists of a single word of paramount importance although it is but a repetition to the last word in the ninth line. Grammatically, this word carries the meaning of ‘progressive participle’ in English, the verb “*running*” indicates that the subject is in action. In this way, this process has two-fold importance: one as a perpetual indicator of active movement forward, and two, as a restatement of the continual process of doing the

best the persona can: progressing forward.

Instead of negligence as in “I no longer care when it’s gone”, the eleventh line symbolizes the target of his progress: the moment transcends into something more than a mere human. To analyze the line carefully by weaving into previous lines, the persona has an ultimate goal or reason for leaving everything behind. This line, “until pains I no longer feel” does not mean the persona wants to simply become immune to such feelings. Rather, it knows that the only way to elevate itself is by surpassing the quality of mortals. Therefore, instead of immunity, this very line signals ascension: the only way of eliminating pain is not by tolerating or being immune to it, but by becoming a better being that is no longer troubled by emotion such as the feeling of pain.

The above interpretation of signaling ascension is supported by translating the twelfth line: Thus, uncaring will I become. The adjective ‘uncaring’ is intentionally chosen to translate the Indonesian phrase “lebih tidak peduli”. The reason is that usual English words such as ignorance or negligence do not share the same sense of the original Indonesian phrase. The more representative translation will be “Less and less will I care about everything”. Such “uncaring” is important as the persona realizes something much greater than everything. This realization comes next to the last line which concludes the poem.

The last line is of course the final statement of the entire poem. This is where the persona states its ultimate wish that it so eagerly wants from the moment it rejects the entire world so that it can exact revenge on its society. “I want to have a thousand-year of living” means almost similar to wanting to be immortal, or wanting to be the same as divine beings, as only these divines are known to be able to live that longer.

Going back to the tenth line that only consists of a single word, it is now clear that the persona of the poem does not actually want to progress forward, instead upward, thus keep ascending until it becomes the highest being a human can be God.

In comparison, here are three attempted efforts of the poem’s translation. The first is a ‘soft-core’ line-by-line translation that is meant as steppingstone or learners’ material. Even in this soft format, some readers may already be able to notice the imbued transcendental wish the poem-persona so desperately wants to tell:

It’s I

When my time comes due
I want no one tempting issues

Not even it’s you

And those whines no longer ensue

For the bitchy one I am
Already stripped off from its stem

Let those bullets my skin pierce
Only onward will I move with fierce

To poison-wounds dare I take running
And keep running
Till their pains begin vanishing

To be less-care shall I keep going
For a thousand-year I desire a living!

For more 'liberal' translation, the poem can be translated by reflecting the wish to be free, which for many, is said to be the common interpretation of the poem. Here, the translation is based on what the persona really wants. Readers' discretion is advised for the minor presence of harsh words before they read:

What I Want

What I really want
Is none of those things

Not even you
Just stop that whining

I, anyway, am an alien
In anytime, at anywhere, to anyone un-befit

Sure, those raining bullets won't stop me
For I just keep moving

Fuck those wounds and poisons
I'll take them running
Till I bear no pain

And give shit to everything
For only eternity I see myself in.

Now, the last attempt of translation is aimed at interpreting the poem's "beast" when describing the poem-persona. As a matter of fact, this is what we set out to disclose or highlight from the start: the "transcendental beast," by which the persona identifies itself, and yearns to fully embrace the beast's innate characteristics to help itself transcend into a higher being.

Here, the beast is used as a tool, a borrowed metaphor to express the persona's inner strength, and bravery, all the while to use that same amount of power to express nonchalance and, probably, more importantly, to exact revenge. This symbol of a strong beast avenging itself against the society and distancing from it as the persona either sees that such society is no longer worth any of its time or it is destined to be a much better being than the entire society becomes the basic argument of this article because this symbolization carries the main point of transcendentalism: to be higher and better being than whatever it was in the past.

In this way, the transcendental beast no longer states a mere wish of the persona, rather it is more of a promise for what will happen in the future: the persona leaves clear message that in the future, the society will see a better version of the beast, even though it is just an outcast. Hence, if the readers attempt to read the poem from the viewpoint of a "wild beast", they might end up translating the poem in the following way (please be advised, strong words are present in the translation):

Watch Me

Watch me you, scums!
For it matters not,

Your tears and everybody else's
Think I'd give a shit?

A wild beast I certainly am
An outcast meant I always am

Think those bullets matter?
Or those wounds?
And those poisons?

Or you suckers think I'll stop
Un-dare to continue running?

Off, then fuck you all, for
A damn God I'm gonna be!

From the last translation, it is clear how the persona wants to set itself free from society by relying on its own strength, the beast that lies within. This beast and its raw power are all that is necessary for the persona - as individual - to break free from the corrupt chains of its society.

This separation is important as one of the transcendental conditions. As Emerson says in *Self-Reliance* (1841), "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who

would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world” (pp.3-4). The break-up is also necessary as Emerson calls this necessity as “genius-self” needed to transcend into a higher being: “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, — that is genius” (p. 1).

The idea of the transcendental genius is also clearly reflected in the very last line of the poem: only by becoming a god, can it transcend its soul over anything, including the past remnant of the persona as an old self. This is in accordance with Emerson’s opinions in the *Over-Soul* (1841), “The soul’s advances are not made by gradation, such as can be represented by motion in a straight line; but rather by ascension of state, such as can be represented by metamorphosis, — from the egg to the worm, from the worm to the fly” (p. 6). Thus, such advance is also the conclusion, the ultimate wish of the persona, because the whole poem can be structurally concluded into a single sentence taken from its first, mid, and last lines: Watch me as my beast-self turns godly!

CONCLUSION

Using a three-step translation method, we were able to showcase the existence of a textual being, the voice of a persona inherent within the poem’s structure. This persona has a pivotal function: to voice a wish to transcend into something bigger or higher than itself. In the words of Emerson (1841), the persona metamorphoses into a higher divine being and thus proving the case of transcendentalism as the beast in the poem ascends into a sacred being. The presence of such a persona in the poem does not, even for the least, negate or blame the previous trials of *Aku*’s poetic interpretations which mostly focus on the extrinsic functions of the poem such as a medium to deliver the spirit of independence or individual resilience. Rather, the current interpretation that shows how a poem can be interpreted for the sake of the poem itself – thus always giving a way for the inherent, textual being to speak for its own behalf – should give an alternative, instead of counter-reading, that further adds enrichment to the whole gamut of poetic meanings.

As there are many ways to read a poem, there should even be more than many ways to interpret any poem. Connecting the historical facts of the poem with the author, or even analyzing the poem’s ideological part in modern society, all these - and other possible methods of analyses - are left for future researchers to contribute their part. If any, this article is hoped to at least be their initial steppingstone to produce much larger and more excellent academic contributions.

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