



**To cite this article:**

Foulcher, Keith. "Translation of Amir Hamzah's 'Barangkali'." *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 14 (December 2019): 194-196.

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Australian Association for Literary Translation

## Translation of Amir Hamzah's "Barangkali"

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*"There are two great maxims of translation—either turn the foreign author into a native author or induce the reader to go out to the author's foreignness"* (J.W. von Goethe, 1813).<sup>24</sup>

The age-old question that haunts every act of translation – domestication or estrangement? – is perhaps particularly acute in the case of Amir Hamzah. A Malay prince and Indonesian nationalist, who turned his back on the promptings of his heart under the heavy weight of inherited duty and who died prematurely as the victim of social revolution, Amir belongs to a past world, "another country" in more ways than one. He wrote in a language never before used as a language of literature – a unique blend of the classical Malay of his courtly heritage and the emerging form of modern Malay that had only recently been dubbed "Bahasa Indonesia", "the language of Indonesia", or Indonesian. Within a decade, his world, and his literary idiom, would be swept away by the tumultuous birth of the Indonesian nation, leaving him and his poetry preserved in time, a small jewel in the new nation's heritage.

For me, the translator's search for a pathway between domestication and estrangement begins in this case with a sensitivity to the poem's origins and a consideration of its likely effect on the ear of a modern Indonesian reader. Seen in this light, Amir's "Barangkali" does indeed appear "distant" and "strange": its form recalls the metre of the traditional Malay quatrain with its regular mid-line caesura, it is peppered with archaisms and self-consciously poetic idiom, and its sonorities are replete with the assonance and alliteration so beloved of the oral tradition that gives birth to it. Perhaps equally distant is the sentiment that propels the poem: the sublimation of earthly desire into a longing for mystical union with the Divine. Strange indeed—but how redolent of its times!

Outside of his own Malay/Indonesian heritage, Amir Hamzah knew and took inspiration from the mystical religious poetry of Asian traditions; he also had some familiarity with nineteenth century European Romanticism, to which he and his peers were introduced through their colonial Dutch education. Among his many translations from Dutch language sources are two poems by the great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, who died just five years earlier than Amir himself, in 1941. Tagore translated his own poems of this time into English, producing an idiom which in my imagination rings with the voice of his younger Indonesian contemporary: "If thou speakest not I will fill my heart with thy silence and endure it. I will keep still and wait like the night with starry vigil and its head bent low with patience..." (*Gitanjali* 19). This may be a "strange" voice to the modern ear, but to me it is one worth going out of our way to meet on its own terms, rather than "domesticating" according to our own.

It was this approach, and this model, which was the guide for my journey between domestication and estrangement in translating Amir Hamzah's "Barangkali".

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<sup>24</sup> This quote was sourced from: Aurobindo Bose. "On Translating Balākā." In Rabindranath Tagore. *A Flight of Swans, Poems from Balākā*. Translated by Aurobindo Bose. London: MacMillan, 1962: 11.

**Bibliography**

Hamzah, Amir. "Barangkali". First published in *Njanji Sunji*, a special edition of *Poedjanga Baroe*, 5.5 (1937).

**Barangkali**  
**By**  
**Amir Hamzah**

Engkau yang lena dalam hatiku  
Akasa swarga nipis-tipis  
Yang besar terangkum dunia  
Kecil terlindungi alis

Kujunjung di atas hulu  
Kupuji di pucuk lidah  
Kupangku di lengan lagu  
Kudaduhkan di selendang dendang

Bangkit Gunung  
Buka mata-mutiara-mu  
Sentuh kecapi firdusi  
Dengan jarimu menirus halus

Biar siuman dewi-nyanyi  
Gambuh asmara lurus lampai  
Lemah ramping melidah api  
Halus harum mengasap keramat

Mari menari dara asmara  
Biar terdengar swara swarna  
Barangkali mati di pantai hati  
Gelombang kenang membanting diri

**Perchance**  
**By**  
**Amir Hamzah**  
**Translated by Keith Foulcher**

Thou who slumber'st inside my heart  
Vault of heaven yet filament fine  
Wrapped large within the earth's  
embrace  
Sheltered small beneath an eyebrow's  
span

I bear thee aloft, my head bowed low  
I sing thy praise on the tip of my tongue  
I cradle thee in the arms of my song  
I rock thee to sleep in my lullaby's lilt

Arise my Beloved  
Open thine eyes of pearl  
Touch the heavenly lyre  
With thy fingers delicately tapering

Let the goddess of song be roused  
Summon love's dancer, supple and  
strong  
A flickering flame softly illuming  
Holy fragrance in smoke-laden air

Come let us dance, young maiden of  
love  
Let the golden voices be heard  
Perchance to be free from the call of  
time past  
Pounding like waves on the shores of  
my heart.