



**To cite this article:**

AHLSTRAND, JANE. "Conveying Emotion in the Poetry of Norman Erikson Pasaribu: Review of Tiffany Tsao's Translation of Sergius Seeks Bacchus." *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 15, (2020): 64-67.

[aalitra.org.au](http://aalitra.org.au)

Australian Association for Literary Translation

## Conveying Emotion in the Poetry of Norman Erikson Pasaribu: Review of Tiffany Tsao's Translation of *Sergius Seeks Bacchus*

JANE AHLSTRAND  
University of New England

Pasaribu, Norman Erikson. *Sergius Seeks Bacchus*. Translated by Tiffany Tsao. Giramondo Publishing, 2019.

———. “Sergius Mencari Bacchus.” *Asymptote*, <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/poetry/norman-erikson-pasaribu-sergius-seeks-bacchus/indonesian/>.

Members of the LGBT community occupy an extremely precarious position in Indonesia's post-authoritarian social-political landscape. As a nation historically built on family values, hegemonic heteronormativity continues to suppress the true cultural, religious, ethnic, and indeed, sexual and gender diversity of Indonesia. Identifying as a gay, ethnic Batak Christian, the poet, Norman Erikson Pasaribu lives as a triple minority in Majority Muslim, Java-centric, heteronormative Indonesia. In *Sergius Mencari Bacchus* (Sergius Seeks Bacchus), Pasaribu presents a series of heart-felt poems, and a very human account of the impact of living under conditions of extreme prejudice. Tiffany Tsao's English translation of his compilation of Indonesian poetry represents an important literary contribution to international understandings of the struggle of members of Indonesia's LGBT community. Tsao's translation thus becomes a direct line between Pasaribu and the wider English-speaking international community, as he expresses the human impact of multiple, often intersecting layers of oppression from society, church and most sadly, the intimate realm of the family.

The most outstanding aspect of Tsao's translation is the preservation of Pasaribu's strong sense of emotion. Where confrontational forms of resistance from such a stigmatized position would place him at risk of violence, Pasaribu instead activates personal affect, whimsy and humour as his weapon to touch and move readers. Through her thoughtful choice of words, Tsao successfully conjures the deep emotions and poeticism that Pasaribu conveyed in his original Indonesian work; in particular, highlighting an acute sense of loneliness derived from lifelong social rejection and isolation. I found myself shedding tears after reading only the first few lines of the first poem in the book, which is a credit to both Pasaribu and Tsao. Comparing the English with the original translation, I discovered that on many occasions Tsao's word choice differed slightly from the original Indonesian version. Where a literal translation, I expect, would fail to capture this underlying expression of affect, Tsao's literary translation infused the poetry with the intense emotion and aching loneliness that echoes throughout each of Pasaribu's poems. The poem titled “He and the Tree” (*Ia dan Pohon*), conjures feelings of guilt, regret, loneliness and hope experienced by a gay man reflecting on his life. The opening line reads:

At high noon he sought forgiveness from the solitary tree

*Siang itu ia meminta maaf kepada satu-satunya pohon*

In Tsao's translation, the event occurs at "high noon," which enhances the perceived emotional intensity, by emphasizing the point at which the sun is highest in the sky, and most glaring. Pasaribu's original only refers to *siang*, which can take place anytime between 10 and 2 pm in Indonesia, when the sunlight heats and illuminates the earth. Within this setting, Tsao's representational choice of "seeking forgiveness", rather than apologizing as indicated in the original expression, *meminta maaf*, emphasizes the protagonist's feelings of guilt. Furthermore, While Pasaribu describes the "one and only" tree (*satu-satunya pohon*) as the target of the apology, Tsao's refers to "the solitary tree", which accentuates his feelings of extreme loneliness and isolation.

Tsao's augmentation of loneliness is also evident in *Curriculum Vitae 2015*, which, in ironic contrast to the title, summarizes a young gay man's painful treatment by his family and community from childhood to the present day, rather than his work history. In part 12 of the poem, Pasaribu mentions the protagonist's success in gaining acceptance into the best high school in the city, only to follow with news of his social rejection. The original line reads *Sahabatnya di SMP menjauhinya*, which Tsao translates as, "His only friend from middle school started avoiding him". While Pasaribu refers to "his friend", Tsao refers to "his only friend", which marks the acute sense of social isolation experienced by the protagonist.

While *Curriculum Vitae 2015* presents ruminations on loneliness and social rejection, Pasaribu also conveys a contrasting feeling of hope, realized with Christian themes of salvation and acceptance, which also became a common thread woven throughout many of his poems. In the final stanza, he describes a hypothetical future involving marriage and children, as well as social and biblical acceptance of his descendants within heteronormative, church-sanctioned norms:

Your descendants will fill the Earth so that whenever anyone is walking alone in the dark they will hear from every window on every building on both sides of the street, voices reaching out, 'Salam!' "Salam!" "Salam!"

*Buah-buah kalian akan memenuhi Bumi ini, sehingga kelak ketika seseorang berjalan sendiran dari tiap jendela di tiap bangunan di tiap tepi jalan terdengar, "Salam!" "Salam!" "Salam!"*

While Pasaribu simply refers to those who "walk alone", here, Tsao demonstrates her skill as a literary translator through the added reference to darkness, by denoting those who are "walking alone in the dark". In so doing, not only does Tsao manage to conjure painful feelings of loneliness by playing upon a metaphor of light and dark, she successfully ignites Pasaribu's underlying expression of desire for acceptance by God, who is commonly associated with light. Indeed, in the previous line, Pasaribu portrays the protagonist's desire to marry his partner before God, and alludes to the Holy Trinity, or perhaps a "third gender".

While Tsao's translations consistently reflected Pasaribu's emotive message, and his desire to illustrate the compatibility of his sexuality with Christian values, I was surprised by her translation of one aspect of the poem, *Purgatorio*, which pulses with Christian themes of sin and punishment. Where Pasaribu makes an obvious biblical reference, Tsao apparently omits it in preference for a more abstract, secular interpretation:

As was promised by the knowledge in the trees  
He was following directions, taking cues

*Sesuai dengan anugerah Pohon Pengetahuan,  
Ia hanya mengikuti petunjuk dan isyarat*

Here, Pasaribu clearly refers to the tree of knowledge (*Pohon Pengetahuan*) from the book of Genesis, whereas Tsao chooses the more abstract form, “the knowledge in the trees”. I can only speculate upon her choice, which she may have made in order to leave the reference open to interpretation by a broader, secular audience, while maintaining a tree metaphor that permeated many of Pasaribu’s poems.

As a final comment, I would like to draw attention to Tsao’s decision not to translate the word, *banci*. This pejorative term is used to refer to a man who dresses or behaves effeminately, but semantically contains a range of meanings including “faggot”, or “sissy”. When used against a gay man from someone from outside the gay community, the term is highly discriminative. In his first poem, *Erratum*, Pasaribu conjures childhood memories of the realization of his sexuality, and the pain of rejection by family. Here we encounter the first use of the word, *banci* used against the protagonist by his father in the line

Don’t ever come back, Banci

*Jangan kembali lagi, Banci*

By maintaining the original word in the reflective poem, Tsao conveys the intensity of the father’s cruelty against his own son. Translating this word into English would lose the emotive impact of the original, as it derives its meaning from a historical cultural setting. The word appears again in the similarly reflective poem, *Curriculum Vitae 2015*. In this case, it is used against the protagonist again by the father, as well as the local Batak community, indicating rejection at both the familial and community level.

One Sunday morning, his father took him and his brothers to jog and play soccer on a badminton court nearby. *You banci!* His father screamed in front of everyone.

*Suatu Minggu ayahnya mengajak ia dan adik-adiknya lari pagi dan bermain sepakbola di lapangan bulutangkis dekat rumah mereka. Ayahnya menjeriaki ia “banci” di depan orang-orang.*

Not long after he graduated from college, he discovered the rest of the Batak community called him ‘si banci’ behind his back

*Tak lama setelah lulus kuliah ia mengetahui bahwa di belakangnya warga Batak di lingkungan menyebut ia “banci.”*

Overall, Tiffany Tsao has demonstrated a great deal of sensitivity in her translation of Norman Pasaribu’s poetry, which has enabled her to uphold the emotional impact of his work and convey it to a new audience. While Pasaribu’s original

Indonesian language poetry may have a limited readership, it is hoped that the English language translation assists in raising awareness of the struggle of Indonesia's gay community, while making international connections with members of LGBT communities and its allies across the world.