

## *An Analytic Study of Foreign Translator's View of Arab Culture*

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### **Abstract**

No culture has been misrepresented and distorted by Western cultures like the Arab/Islamic one. Translation plays a considerable role between different cultures it encounters and their respective languages. The paper will try to concentrate on how the Western world looks at the Arab culture through translation; it has an enormous negative effect on the way Arabs are viewed abroad. The fast development in communications has decreased the element that causes difficulty in translating elements from the insider point of view of the Arab/Islamic cultures. The key to cultural translation which can lead to a globally understood culture is to ensure rationality in the target culture, especially if the openness of the target text and beliefs allow multiple interpretations.

# دراسة تحليلية لرؤية المترجمين الاجانب عن الثقافة العربية

الباحثة

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## المخلص

لا توجد ثقافة شوهت من قبل العالم الغربي مثل التحريف التي حصل على الثقافة العربية الاسلامية. تلعب الترجمة دوراً بارزاً بين الثقافات واللغات المختلفة. هذا البحث يحاول ان يركز على نظرة العالم الغربي الى الثقافة العربية من خلال الترجمة ، اذ ان لديها تاثير سلمي هائل على كيفية رؤية الغرب لنا. ان التطور السريع في الاتصالات الحديثة ساهم في تقليل الصعوبة في ترجمة عناصر من وجهة النظر الداخلية للثقافات العربية – الاسلامية. ان مفتاح نجاح الترجمة الجيدة هو توفر العقلانية والمنطق في اختيار العناصر المشتركة الموجودة في اللغة لغرض الوصول الى ثقافة مفهومة عالمياً.

## **1-Introduction**

Arabic life, in many ways, may appear very unconventional to the average Westerner, but what may seem abnormal to a person in an English speaking culture/society is perfectly reasonable for a member of an Arabic culture/society. This has to do largely with a culture's social structure.

The problem –to a Westerner- is in that the Arab cultures place a significant emphasis on tradition, religion, and customs rather than of the individual. They stress a great deal on some particular factors and take them to be more valuable, more characteristic, and more significant in a spiritual sense than the rest. The individual, therefore, concerns him/herself and traditions that hold him away from any change, which is something of a mystery to the more secular West.

Because of these reasons, the Arabs/Muslims have become interested in their self-image, which they try to save from the other. They attempt to concentrate on their particular problems, to ignore those of others, despite the negative costs. “The Arabs seem to have been more preoccupied with expressing their own identity, which they isolate from other identities, because of the conflicts that occurred with the European and Ottoman entities” (Sharawy,1999: 5).

The Arab culture/society looks at international Western culture as *absurd*. They lean towards making relatively small social changes and to trivial radical divisions that are not too large to have the influence that can change the culture that they got so used to, which is why a good translator (Arab translators especially) has to attempt to build an equivalent between cultures; this could lead to marginalizing the big differences between the two. The Arab society,

in general, does not reject the past, its historical spirit, it looks at it with great authenticity, they treasure it as a great honor, it is considered its identity that no one can reach up to. Although Said Faiq talks of the “integration within the so-called global village, representations of some cultures” (2005: 2), we are still at fault of not accepting and understanding the other through translation or writing about them.

## **2. Translation and Culture**

Edward Said, in the introduction for his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, insists that culture, can mean “the arts of description, communication, and representation that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure” (Said, 1993: xxi).

One of the fundamental components of translation is culture, as “it brings the two together, translations are by necessity a multifaceted, a multi-problematic process with different manifestations in different cultures of the world ” (Faiq,2004:36).Hence, our primary concern is translation and its part in depicting other cultures, which no one can ignore or deny how it exerts a tremendous influence in depicting of different cultures. Sherry Simon puts it beautifully:

It was only a question of time until cultural studies discovered translation. After all, the globalization of culture means that we all live in ‘translated worlds, that the spaces of knowledge we inhabit assembled ideas and styles of multiple origins, that transnational communications and frequent migrations make every cultural site a crossroads and a meeting place (1996, 127).

As it is known, when a text is from a different culture than that of the source text, it is often hard to communicate the same meaning intended by the original author. For the rendition, to have the same underlying forces of the ST; it has to be rational and informal so that the readers will find it easy to understand the message, including significant effect intended by the writer. Each source language text is written in a different cultural background, which must all be taken into thought if an excellent, faithful translation is the goal of the translator. There is a kind of mutual respect for the other culture when translating.

Nida is one of the first scholars to refer to the cross-cultural side of a translation. In his Famous book, *Towards a Science of Translation* (1964), he draws our attention to how most translators are affected by their ethics, and that cultural differences may lead to complications for the translator. But he contradicts this in a statement in his book, *Fascinated by Languages*, where he makes an interesting note; a cultural misunderstanding of the Arab society with the many different accents and dialects, and editorial Arabic (Nida did not mention the classical Arabic of the Qur'an). When he traveled to Lebanon, in the hope of understanding the Arabic version of the Bible, he clearly did not explain the difference between the various Arab dialects and accents when he hoped that the language of the Bible should be:

more on the level of acceptable newspaper editorials rather than in the more traditional Koranic form of language. But we immediately faced the issue of different sociolinguistic level expressed so well by the common adage. No Arab will admit that another Arab knows how to write Arabic. The rivalry between

Lebanon and Egypt about these matters delayed progress for a number of years, and only a highly competent translation consultant was able to resolve the issues.(2003:25).

The above example, coming from a famous linguist and scholar like Nida, reminds us of how the other misunderstands the Arab culture and language. Newspaper editorial Arabic is the official Arabic that all Arabs understand; that is after the classical Arabic of the Qur'an. Of course, this reminds us of how Said talked about in his writings and worked on Orientalism, post-colonial, cultural studies, and by the questioning of the apparent and smooth strategies of anthropology. Also, notice the phrase "*no Arab would admit that another Arab knows how to write Arabic.*" Apparently Nida wants to give the impression that Arabs battle on something that does not exist in the first place. This as well as the fact that the "Gospels and Psalms existed in Arabic before the rise of Islam"(Wild,2014:n.p.).

Another indication is the example of how the Arab/Muslim culture is misinterpreted and how the West sees Arabic poetry is how Simon in her book, *Gender in Translation*, talks about how "the masking of gender identities in the translation of homosexual Arabic poetry into English in the nineteenth century" (1996:159).

Although there are numerous books and papers on the history of Arab culture and its use of poetry, a westerner -writer or translator- never really understands how and why most poetry is transcribed in the masculine. The use of the masculine is a way to hide the identity of the female lover, which those non-Arab translators failed to convey. It is used mostly out of respect and honor towards the woman who is the subject of that poem. Anyone that is part of or studied Arab culture and history would know this.

Lu'lu'(2013:67) in his book *Arabic –Andalusian Poetry and The Rises of the European love lyric*, states that “ many European and American writers until recently used to think the Arab poets were homosexual because they used the masculine adjective in addressing the woman they loved or referred to her with the masculine adjective”(2013:67)

An interesting point made by Lambert (2006: 171) in his statement concerning culture and society, that despite the different studies done on communities and culture, the academic world is still nowhere near finding the right way to dealing with that problem. It is quite clear that they deal with traditional societies by various layers in traditional and theoretical models, which contradict as well as affect their competence. The fact is that they do so mistakenly while living in a multi-layered and mixed environment. Cultural studies should promote research on culture in contact with other experiences.

### **3- Translation and Religion**

So far, most translation scholars agree on the fact that the social norms of a culture are misrepresented and ignored, for example, the effect of religion, how powerful it is and how it is looked at differently in the Arab world. Little has been done to avoid making so many drastic translation mistakes, most translators still when rendering the meaning of a text would adopt the closest, safest expressions in the target language, while at the same time ignoring the original intended meaning of the text. The translation of religious terms is very tricky and challenging. It may be a very sensitive and complicated topic, especially in the current situation of Islam in the world and sectarian differences in Iraq and the Middle East.

In the translation of Khudayyir's *Basrayatha* (1993), he talks of :

في يوم الجمعة المشرق، يبدأ سادة النهار استعراضهم الحاشد بانشاء القيامة الدنيوية " التحري عن مواطن الخطأ و الابتذال و تدهور الأخلاق و بشوق جارف، و جزع روحي يستقصي بعضهم بعضاً بأسئلة مترادفة. حين يعثر أحدهم على صديقه القديم يبدأ بالسؤال (عن الأحوال و العيال و محصول الموسم الجديد" (ص ٣٠

However, in the translation by Hutchins (2007), he conveys القيامة الدنيوية to:

*"Each radiant Friday, the lords of the day began their crowded review by unleashing a **day of judgment** on this world: an integration of the errors of a fellow citizen, his vulgarity and carless abuse of ethical norms-carried out with an all-consuming desire and with spiritual distress, as one probed another with a flurry of inquiries. On encountering an old friend, one would start with questions about status, family, and the yield of the new season" (p 10)*

The **day of judgment** in English is the equivalent of يوم القيامة or يوم الحساب which is not what the author means. Hutchins is not successful in translating the insider meaning. What the author is describing is how people would gather to question one another on what has been happening during the past week, hence his use of the word دنيوية. The translated text should be accompanied by a foot note explaining the difference between the two-that is القيامة الدنيوية and يوم القيامة.

In another example from *Basrayatha* :

و غدا (الزايير) الطيب رجلاً يدخل المضيف المزدحم بالفلاحين مرتدياً معطفه " الانكليزي الثقيل الأسود، كسيد غريب مستوطن بين العباءات الخفاف، رمزاً ( متمدناً) من الرموز التي كانت تلمّ بالقريّة البعيدة أحياناً تحت أسماء شتى" (ص ١٢٦

*“The good-hearted **Pilgrim** became a man who-clad in his heavy, black English overcoat and looking like a resident alien-entered the village guesthouse, which was crowded with farmers clad in light cloaks. It was a symbol of enlightenment-one of many-that visited the distant village occasionally, bearing various names. ”(p 134)*

Although the word ‘pilgrim’ in English refers to anyone who visits a holy shrine, it is entirely different from its uses in Arabic, it stands for the pilgrimage to Mecca only. الزاير – the **Zayyer**, which holds a special place in Iraqi culture, is a person who goes to visit the shrine of the Imam Al-Ridah in Mashhad, Iran. It is a complex which contains the mausoleum of the eighth Imam of Twelver Shiites. **Al-Zayyer or Al-Zayyera** is a person who travels to visit Al-Ridah in Mashhad/Iran. Zayyer is an Iraqi word that is not used or understood in other Arab/Islamic countries; it is completely different from a person who goes on a pilgrimage to Mecca. It is best to transliterate the Arabic word with an explanation of the actual meaning of the word in a footnote.

The examples above show a translator from an English speaking culture who did not try to get as close as possible to the religious denotation of the source text. Because of the western ignorance of the Arab/Islamic culture, the Arab society is still viewed as the barbarous other, and we in the Arab world still see the West as the imperialist invader who is somehow trying to prove it is better than us. Faiq(2004:1) puts it precisely as “cultures do not change fast. Cultures remain by large prisoners of their respective pasts”.

It is more than clear that books written in English are more likely translated into other languages. However, other languages also need to be taken seriously, for the literature of other cultures and

languages have found a wider audience. The way in which many languages spread and change is linked to the current worldwide development of modern culture designs. The fast growing of major social network programs like Facebook and Twitter has the greatest influence on the spread of the English language and western culture in other societies.

It is noticed how people of younger generation have stopped using classical Arabic and are more in the use of slang of their local accent or dialect. The way in which many languages spread and change connects to the current worldwide development of modern culture designs. The fast growing of major social network programs like Facebook and Twitter have had the greatest influence on the spread of the English language and western culture in other societies. Arabic comes in multiple dialects, modern standard Arabic is the reconciling factor amongst the multiple Arabic Dialects.

Arab T.V. channels use local accents in their programs and the only time one would expect to hear classical Arabic is when the Qur'an is read on T.V. Modern standard is only used on News Channels and Documentaries. It is considered a fact that if you were to get the right job and expect to be hired by a respectable company, the first thing asked is whether the applicant can speak English fluently, because of the massive development in worldwide communications; English has become the leading and influential language all over the world. To the contrary, we can hardly find people who use modern standard or classical Arabic in their everyday life. Translation, for its part, can make a powerful contribution to understanding and respecting distinctness and difference as well as relatedness. Translation can either both strengthen the fragile cultures

and make their less known languages well known or cause hostility or more bloody wars.

It can be said that it has now become more possible, in this case, to keep Arab/Iraqi cultural elements in target texts. The translator has to make the right choices and include more foreign words in the final translated texts. Cultures are so varied that translators face a significant task in assisting readers to grasp the source culture. In translation studies, there is an emphasis on the main dominant cultures; as a result, studies are dedicated to analyzing western literature.

In the academic world of translation, a translator assumes “that translation should create a readership that is open to cultural differences for a true globalization of cultures, and improve cultural relations rather than be a tool for reinforcing and diffusing existing representations and images of one culture about the other”(Abuelma’ti,2005: viii).This reminds us of what Venuti (1998a: 396) has argued that trying to domesticate translations “do not guarantee that the target culture will remain free of "corruption" of foreign influences as any translating can bring about unexpected cultural and political changes.”

#### **4- Translation from Arabic**

As far as translation from Arabic is concerned, there seems to be a continuous interaction between the Western perceptions of the Arab/ Islamic culture and the politics by which texts from Arabic are chosen, rewritten and circulated into mainstream European languages. Translation from Arabic is carried out within an already established framework in which the Arab/ Islamic culture has been

associated with a mixture of characteristics of darkness, violence, naivety, and barbarism that impress and appeal to the Western public. Translation, of course, depends on what the translator /publisher wants to accomplish with an original translation. The text remains more exotic and foreign; this keeps the translator closer to the publisher wants and away from original intended meaning. The reader of the target texts gets an inaccurate image of the source culture. Globalization has made this option possible and more acceptable. It is politics that decides what is and what not to translate. A good example is how mostly female writers who discuss or write novels that talk about the problems that women face in that close-knit culture. What better way to prove a point than translating something negative written by a native speaker. The quick translation of *Girls of Ryad*, by Rajaa Al-Sanaa, who is virtually an unknown writer, is a good example (her book was published in 2006 and translated in 2007). The translated version does not only change some of the texts in the book but also written in a western manner of writing.

Another example is the novel “*The Book of the Girls*”, published in Amman in 2009 under the title, “*Saydat Zuhail*” (*Saturn Ladies*). The novel is centered on a group of Iraqi women who have fled the horrors of Baghdad for Amman. Al-Dulaimi’s tone in the novel in many ways is what the West likes to expect to find in Iraqi society. Throughout the novel words like: “adult female friends, men (all bastards), life (unpredictable), work, ...[ “girls” are Iraqi refugees]...[ raped and left for dead]...[ lies naked in her own blood]...[her family discuss the killing]”(Qualey,2010:1).

The approach of the west to the translation of certain Arabic texts causes great damage to how the West views our Arab/Islamic

culture. The capacity of development in communication results in our current crushing sense of lack of concentration. The media has been an important part of modernism. Our national borders are suffering a massive flow of capital, people, goods, images, and information. The increase in global interconnectedness has dramatically transformed not only organizations of public life but also social awareness. Movement of human beings, trade, information, images, converted the way we view culture. Identity is a matter of meaning to people, in general, who are you and what are you.

Cultural identities, as Hall defines in the plural form, are “aspects of our identities which arise from our ‘belonging’ to distinctive ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious and above all, national cultures” (1996:274). Because of freedom of movement, global interconnectivity weakens the general concept of culture and community by altering our sense of closeness and continuity. This single large inventory of culture at the global scale allows individuals or collectivities to assemble particular collections.

Western culture has and will continue to dominate our Arab/Muslim identity. Mahmood (cited in Abulmati, 2005:42) argues that it is the ability of cultures that are stronger technologically to dominate those that are weaker. ‘Cultural globalization,’ he adds, ‘is the way in which a certain culture tries to make its cultural products global, through influencing other cultures’ values and belief systems, to impose its political and economic powers.’

## **5- Conclusion**

If there is one thing to be concluded from the above, as translators or translation students, is the fact that any attempts to enforce the SL culture onto the TL culture are dangerous and unacceptable. Translators have a clear moral duty to the TL readers not to follow the impression that acts as if the original purposes of an author by a self-contained text are not the writers of the original text.

Despite all those efforts done in trying to study and define culture, right up until today, there is no agreement among scholars, anthropologists, even linguists on the real meaning of Arab culture. Arab translators should concentrate on translating texts that convey the true Arab society, history, and culture. Despite the massive development in communications, it has not decreased the way our culture is seen in the west. In a modern global context, we can bring /take more and more outsider elements into a TT, and, thus, keep more of the ST in the translation; this will create a TT that is less of an outsider to for the ST. The key to cultural translation which can lead to a globally understood translation is to convey the rationality in the source text into the target text; to mark the important interrelated ties, especially if the openness of the target text and beliefs allow multiple interpretations.

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