

Cultural Translation Issues in Mikhail Naimy's Short Stories

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Abstract:

Translators of Arabic into English encounter many impediments that hinder the process of transcending the literal translation and rendering the true spirit of the original text. The lack of English equivalences and the different cultural dimensions are two elements that may disguise the true or "correct" rendition of the translation product. Therefore, many translators adopt the Arabic phrase or expression, thus solving some of the problems of translation, and simultaneously enriching the English language with novel foreign words. While J.R. Perry adopted certain Arabic words, he interpreted some expressions "unidiomatically" in his translation of three short stories by the Lebanese Mikhail Naimy: *A New Year*, *Noblesse Oblige*, and *His Grace*.

Key Words: untranslatability, cultural translation, culture-specific, Mikhail Naimy, J.R. Perry

Introduction

Cultural translation has always been a minefield for translators who take upon themselves the task of presenting the true spirit of the source language into the target language while maintaining and preserving that source language's culture with all its ideals, beliefs, customs and unique perception of the world. It is a challenging process of rendering the source language's culture without modifying or overpowering it by the target language's culture. In order to remain respectful and true to the source language's culture, a translator must have abundant knowledge of not only the linguistic elements of the language, but also its cultural milieu. Since the linguistic labels of items in different languages are not necessarily interchangeable, the translator may attempt to convey the intended meaning using various translating methods such as literal translation, transliteration, borrowing, adaptation and paraphrasing. This paper sheds light on J. R. Perry's¹ attempt of extracting the true spirit of Mikhail Naimy's² Arabic short stories and

¹ John R. Perry was born in Britain and was educated at Cambridge University (Pembroke College), where in 1970 he was awarded a Ph.D. in Oriental Studies (Arabic and Persian). He taught Persian and Arabic languages and their literatures at the University of Chicago (University of Chicago website).

² Mikhail Naimy [Nu'ayma] was born in Biskinta, Lebanon in 1889. He studied in different schools in Nazareth, Palestine; Poltava, the Ukraine; Russia and obtained two bachelor degrees in literature and law

representing it in the English language without restricting that representation due to the lack of cultural and linguistic equivalences in English.

Literature Review

In “The Location of Culture”, Homi Bhabha, one of many theorists and critics who tackled the challenges of cultural translation, considers two options for cultural translators: whether to preserve the culture of the migrant (from the Indian sub-continent to the West) or allow him to assimilate to the new culture (1994). These challenges in translation clearly arise from the fact that the source language and the target language have different syntactical and semantic systems, along with a lack of those lexical equivalences expressing cultural phrases, idioms and synonyms.

In *Translating Literature*, Lefevere states, “Translators, too, are constrained by the times in which they live, the literary traditions they try to reconcile, and the features of the languages they work with” (1992, p.6). Shunnaq also declares that, “he [the translator] is obliged to convey ideas of SLT [Source Language Text] into the TLT [Target Language Text] giving utmost care to the linguistic and cultural norms of the TL [Target Language] as well as its naturalness. In other words, the translator is expected to produce a TLT which should be equivalent, creative, and genuine, and has the SL- cultural flavor” (1998, p.33).

Discussion

When Perry translated Naimy’s short stories, he encountered the problem of delivering the true meaning of the Arabic, particularly Lebanese, expressions as they lack an English equivalence. In addition, many particular expressions of the Lebanese/Arab culture would not be congruent with any English collocation. It was essential to develop a clear context that would create a sense of meaning in the text, and in the process, enrich the English language with novel expressions that might function as more powerful idioms. “Because language is the expression of a culture, many of the words in a language are inextricably bound up with that culture and therefore very hard to transfer in their totality to another language” (Lefevere, 1992, p.17). Also, as Butros suggests in “The English Language and Non-Native Writers of Fiction,” writers make a contribution in terms of words, phrases, idioms, fixed expressions, tone, and emphasis (2004, p. 59). “Words, phrases, metaphors and proverbs may become stale clichés within their own language milieu but transferred to another language, they become fresh and appealing” (Butros, 2004, p. 66). The Oxford English Dictionary is now familiar with Arabic words especially those

from the University of Washington. He, along with other Arab intellectuals from Syria and Lebanon, formed the Pen Bond (al-rabitah al-qalamiyyah). While Naimy wrote poetry and prose, his most renowned works, *The Book of Mirdad* and his autobiography *Sabun* (Seventy) in three volumes, reflect the remarkable spiritual transcendental ideas he espoused and lived by. Moreover, his short stories are known to render the local color of Lebanon. Naimy has written more than eighty short stories collected in *Kan Makan* (Once upon a time), *Akabir* (Highbrows) and *Abu-Batta* in addition to several plays and novels which were translated into many foreign languages. He died in 1988 (Nijland, n.d.).

with religious connotations such as *ulama*, *imam*, *umma*, and others such as *intifada*, *tarbush*, *sheikh*³.

Naimy's short stories: *A New Year* (sanatuha al-jadeeda), *Noblesse Oblige* (akabir), and *His Grace* (sa'adit al-beik) are three examples rampant with various culture-specific events in which their characters used several culture-specific phrases and expressions. For example, *A New Year* is a story of Abu Nasif (Elias Butrus al-Naqous), a Lebanese village *sheikh*, whose wife is expecting and is hoping for a son, as his offspring are all female. The story ends with Abu Nasif burying the new born daughter alive and bribing the mid-wife into announcing that it was a male stillborn. The characters' names and prefixes are preserved as no English lexical item can give a similar meaning using one word. The prefix *abu* denotes that the man is married and that he is a father usually of a boy. In Arab cultures, people address married men and women by the prefix *abu* for fathers and *um* for mothers, while Elias Butrus are Arabic Biblical names for Elijah and Paul highlighting the irony of Elias Butrus' actions. "The name usually contains an allusion to a certain word in the language, and that allusion allows readers to characterize characters..." (Lefevere, 1992, p.39). Schogt also states that "names serve as labels or as means of identification ..." (1988, p.12).

The theme of favoring males over females is a common cultural issue that may sound bizarre to readers of other cultures. Furthermore, the act of paying the mid-wife when announcing a boy is another Arab custom. The literal translation of the expressions that explain those cultural issues lack an English counterpart; hence Perry explains that Abu Nasif promises "wine to flow in rivers and roasts to turn for weeks" (1974, p. 29). Additionally, the Arabic words that Perry retained and did not translate due to a lack of English equivalences are *arak*, *tarboosh*, *sheikh* and *sheikha* (feminine form), *sheikhdom*⁴. "The translator may find some terms in Arabic difficult if they are to be fully translated into English. Consequently, he/she will be obliged to accept a partial equivalent item in English..." (Shunnaq, 1998, p.42). In the case of the word *qaimmaqam*, Perry put the translation (local governor) between brackets as Lefevere suggested. "An expedient solution, used fairly often, is to leave the foreign word or phrase untranslated and then to append a translation between brackets or even to insert a translation into the body of the text a little late, where it would be expedient to do so" (1992, p. 29).

In that story, many Arab Christian habits were portrayed such as displaying statues and icons of Jesus Christ and some saints in people's homes, Abu Nasif praying to Jesus for a boy and pleading to St. Elijah and St. George to grant him his wish, and Abu Nasif promising to dedicate half his vineyards to St. Elijah if he is granted his wish. Another observation of the Lebanese culture was the immigration of many Lebanese youths to America as they "pay their tithe to Columbus" (Perry, 1974, p.25).

In *Noblesse Oblige* (or *Highbrows* as Nadeem Naimy, Mikhail's nephew liked to translate it), a land tenant is stressed about his landlord and his family's visit to his land as the landlord, might ask for interest on top of the poor profit of the land that the tenant works in. The landlord ends up asking for interest and taking the only pets/friends of the tenant's young son (a rooster called

³ Ulama: Muslim scholars; imam: Muslim clergyman who leads prayer in a mosque; umma: Muslim nation.

⁴ Arak: alcoholic drink; tarboosh: head gear; sheik: chieftain, Muslim clergyman, old man; sheikhdom: the state of being sheikh

“Sultan” and a goat kid called “Afrit⁵”). This story is rich with cultural expressions that Perry left intact due to their ‘untranslatability’; a term suggested by Walter Benjamin in ‘The Task of the Translator’ in which he insists that some “translations themselves are untranslatable” (1923, p.61). The wife of the tenant claims that “his [her son’s] little fingernail is the whole world to me” which indicates how precious her son is to her (1974, p. 45) and that she feels “so ashamed” (1974, p. 47) that she is socially beneath the landlord. Out of natural Arab hospitable politeness she says, “We are unworthy for you to sit at our table” (1974, p. 48). As these idioms are culture-specific and lack English counterparts, they were literally translated and were retained in the text despite their ‘foreignness’.

An interesting cultural aspect is also shown when the tenant tried to predict the outcome of the landlord’s visit by counting a random handful of wheat grains. If it turns out to be an odd number then the outcome is bad, if it is an even number then it is a good one. Naturally foreshadowing the story’s sad ending, the count turned out to be an odd number. Moreover, as it is typical of Arabs, the tenants were worried about serving the landlord and his family with food fit to their high status in the way of generous hospitality. However, the landlord’s arrogant wife offends them by not eating their food. Thus, it “struck the couple like a thunderbolt” (1974, p. 48).

In *His Grace* or (sa’adit al-beik), a respectable man called Asad Dawaq resents having to compete with a former servant who acquired the title of “Bey⁶” and so lies and announces to his village that he was elevated to the *beylik*. After many years, he loses his fortune and immigrates to America and becomes a homeless vagabond who eats every night for free at a diner owned by a man from his village. The diner owner continues to address him as *Asad bey*. Although the story’s setting is American, the Arabic cultural expressions are maintained by the characters. When Asad remains, along with his family, at home, the people of his village accuse him of having “nothing to offer in the way of hospitality” (1974, p. 68). He also would not “return the greeting” (1974, p. 67) and “the sins and crimes of the house of Dawaq had been hung like a millstone round his neck” (1974, p.68). The owner of the diner tells the Lebanese customers that “I could not bring myself to disillusion him” although Asad was “up to his ears in debt” (1974, p.71). Perry again literally translated the Arabic expressions as they have no English idiomatic counterparts. Translating the expressions “idiomatically” would make them lose their semantic value. On the other hand, the associated or figurative meaning may become clear from the context even to readers of an “unArabic” background or culture. As Lefevere noticed, “the translation of literature [takes] place not in a vacuum in which two languages meet but rather in context of all the traditions of the two literatures” (1992, p.6).

In the story, the Lebanese customers thought that they were delaying the diner’s owner and told him “so don’t delay on account of us” so the owner answered them that “he and his restaurant were at our [the customers’] disposal” (1974, p.65). Finally, at the end of the story, Asad, having finished eating his meal that consisted of customary Arabic food: *zucchini*, *stuffed vineleaves*, *hummus*, *tripe* (lining of a cow’s stomach) with *hummus*, told the diner’s owner “put

⁵ Afrit: demon

⁶ Bey: his grace, his dignitary

it on my bill” (1974, p.71). Throughout the story, Perry adopts many Arabic words which have no exact English equivalence such as *dabka*, *emir* and *sheikh*⁷.

Butros disregards the lack of English counterparts as a problem and instead considers that the strength of the English languages arises from its flexibility. He explains, “Lexically, the most prolific source of enrichment of English has, of course, been borrowing – from every available and at times exotic language known to man” (2004, p. 60) and stresses that “it is axiomatic that language needs to be continually reinvigorated and injected with fresh means of expression in both lexical and discursual domains” (2004, p. 59).

In other words, the adaptation of some novel expressions from a foreign language is sometimes the only way to achieve a sense of meaning. In some cases, the idiomatic translation might weaken the pragmatic value of the phrase or the expression; therefore, it is preferable and practical that the translator presents a rather literal translation and expounds upon the meaning between brackets or in the form of notes or as Shunnaq suggests, “The meaning could be conveyed through transliteration and paraphrase” (1998, p.43).

Conclusion

The process of translation could be impeded because of various lexical and culture-specific obstacles; therefore, a translator must master both the source language and its culture to be able to produce a “correct” or true interpretation of that source language. Perry presented a close rendition of the Arabic language and culture in his English translation of Naimy’s three very culture-specific Arabic short stories to successfully achieve “the complex negotiation between two cultures” (Harish, 2005). He translated some, transliterated others and left other phrases and idiomatic expressions intact; thus, maintaining the true Arabic spirit in the target language English.

Suggestions and Recommendations

It is suggested that a translator or a consultant in a publishing house consult with an expert or a translator in the translated culture to convey the appropriate equivalences or to put or to add explanations in the form of footnotes or appendices.

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⁷ Dabka: type of dance; emir: prince

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