

A New Perspective on the Cultural, Linguistic and Socio-linguistic Problems in the Translation with Particular Reference to Mohammed Abdul-Wali's Short Fiction

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Abstract

The appearance of the collection *They Die Strangers* (1966) in English (2001) by the Yemeni writer Mohammed Abdul-Wali, published by the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, was a promising start for the Yemeni literature to be known to foreign readers. However, the socio-cultural differences and colloquial words and expressions that challenge the translators hinder a complete faithful translation in many of the short stories by Abdul-Wali. The aim of this paper is to show how the cultural, linguistic and socio-linguistic misinterpretations in the translation of two representative short stories affect the progression of their themes hence fail to convey the level of oppression and frustration in the lives of the Yemeni people during the 1960s. The study is new in its orientation for it will be presented through detailed analysis taking the context of each story as a principal element.

Key words: literary translation, culture, socio-linguistics, Yemeni literature, short fiction

Introduction

In the current age of globalization where communication among countries grows faster, translation is required to transfer the multi-cultural identity faithfully, however, the challenges facing cross-cultural translation become inevitable. As a result, numerous studies on literary translation have, for many years, been involved in finding various types of problems such as linguistic, cultural, pragmatic, religious and stylistic aspects in the translated versions which have been translated by foreigners who are non-native users of Arabic. Many researchers from the Arab region (cf. Abdel-Hafiz, 2003; Shunnaq, 1998; Muhaidat and Neimneh, 2011; among others) are in the same boat for they all became aware that the loss of faithfulness in the original culture will mislead the target readers hence marginalizing its underlying implication and thereby contributing to its failure in communicating the intended socio-cultural messages embedded in the text. Naguib Mahfouz, for instance, is one of the most widely-translated Arab writers today yet his fiction is the most enticing to such research. This is because as Van Leeuwen (2004, p. 14) puts it, "It was in 1988, shortly before Naguib Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, that for the first time I was confronted with the complex cultural and political implications of translating Arabic literature." Practically speaking, the growing interest of this study in translation studies comes as a result of frustration and disappointment, and with no exception, I consider myself one of them in relation to the translation of the Yemeni writer Mohammed Abdul-Wali's short fiction.

The Yemeni cultural context

Yemen is one of the oldest countries which has a well-defined historical background and a rich cultural tradition of its own. The lifestyle of Yemeni people and their traditional characteristics are reflected by their own culture norms. Paradoxically enough in such a rich country, only a few Yemeni literary writers have emerged to reproduce the historical and cultural changes that have been taking place at various points in time. To add insult to injury, the literary works of these few writers which are a manifestation of the Yemeni society and culture are not entirely translated into English hence remain unknown to the outside world. Perhaps the main reason for such fatalistic apathy is an induced passivity and a lack of encouragement by the ministry of cultural affair in Yemen, which comes due to political, financial and religious issues. The Yemeni poet Fatima al-Ashby has been critical of the possibilities of literature in Yemen, pointing out that literature "is no less shaken than the political, economical, social and security status in the country. Standards have been mixed" (in the Observer, 2011).

Mohammed Abdul-Wali and his Fiction

Mohammed Abdul-Wali is one of the most refined Yemeni writers who conveys in his fiction the political and economic difficulties that have been faced by Yemen and its people during the 1960s and the early 1970s. The collection *They Die Strangers*, a novella and thirteen short stories, is published by the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. The Translators are Abubaker Bagader, a Professor of Sociology, at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and Deborah Akers, an Associate Professor of Anthropology, at Ohio State University. The introduction to *They Die Strangers* is written by Shelaph Weir, at the invitation of Texas University Press. Weir provides the family background of Abdul-Wali, his educational achievements and his political activities until his tragic death. In short, Abdul-Wali was muwallad, "person of mixed blood", as his mother was an Ethiopian and his father was an émigré from north Yemen. This mix of family background had an effect on him

which visibly gets reflected in the delineation of his major themes, i.e. emigration, identity and race issues. The stories "have a strong autobiographical feel" (Weir, 2001, p. 4). The theme of the critical political situation in Yemen in the 1950s and 1960s is also central in which Weir felt obligated to present some information against this background, with special focus on the ruthless rulers of North Yemen and their oppression on the Yemeni people. Weir also argues that Abdul-Wali was primarily writing for fellow Yemenis, who would have implicitly understood his often subtle cultural and political references and the contexts of his stories. However, they require some explanation for western readers unfamiliar with Yemen (ibid, p. 5). Not only this but also he writes in colloquial Yemeni which poses more difficulties in the translation of his work.

Literary translation – A brief introduction

Hermans (2007, p. 78) argues that his research for a definition of literary translation, among the devoted works of a number of scholars (e.g. Classe, 2000; France, 2000; Toury, 2000; Lambert, 1998; Bush, 1998; Snell-Hornby et al., 1998), "leads nowhere" because none of their definitions offers a ground whereby they must make a distinction between literary from "other" translation. For him "the standard view is that literary translation represents a distinctive kind of translating because it is concerned with a distinctive kind of text" (Hermans, 2007, p. 77). Hermans statement holds true for the fact that literary text has its own distinctive style and unique characteristics which makes literary translation to be one of the most demanding and challenging task yet very enjoyable.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the study of literary translation focused on the linguistic-oriented approaches where the jobs of the translators were devoted to finding the amount of linguistic similarities as well as differences between the source text and its translated text. It was until the early 1990s the increasing influence of cultural studies in translation started to emerge. The so-called 'cultural turn' as it was coined in the edited collection *Translation, History and Culture* (1990) by the leading figures Bassnett and Lefevere's (see Snell-Hornby in her paper in the same collection) witnessed a new direction in translation studies. Simon mentions that translators are told that in order to accomplish their work in an approved manner they must comprehend the culture of the source text "because texts are 'embedded' in a culture. The more extensive is this 'embedding,' the more difficult it will be to find equivalents for terms and ideas (for instance Snell-Hornby 1988, p. 41)" (1996, p. 130). The cultural-oriented approaches moved from a word-for-word substitution to cultural involvement and further to consider the importance of context and its influence in the way people in different societies behave and communicate; "the text is embedded in a given situation, which is itself conditioned by its sociocultural background" (Honig & Kussmaul, 1982 cited in Snell-Hornby, 1990, p. 83). Bassnett and Lefevere also emphasize the fact that "there is always a context in which the translation takes place, always a history from which a text emerges and into which a text is transposed" (1990, p. 11), (see also Baker, 2006 and House, 2006). Nida assures that failure to consider the contexts of a text is largely responsible for the most serious mistakes in comprehending and reproducing the meaning of a discourse. But contexts need to be understood as influencing all structural levels of a text: phonological, lexical, grammatical, and historical, including events leading up to the production of a text, the ways in which a text has been interpreted in the past, and the evident concerns of those requesting and paying for a translation (Nida, 2001, p. ix).

The following sentence, for example, sounds funny and incongruous when the context of the short story, "On the Road to Asmara," is not taking into consideration:

واربعة بارات كبيرة فاغرة فاها يمرح عند ابوابها الذباب. ص ١١٦
[a]nd four big luxurious bars, flies playing at their door. (p. 132)

The phrase "فاغرة فاها" is rendered into English as "luxurious" while in fact it means a wide open mouth, and it is used metaphorically to indicate that the bars are empty waiting eagerly for customers like a hungry wide-open mouth. The whole narrated events based on a detailed description of the road to Asmara which has been portrayed as a down scale place that is full of poor and desperate people. The question remains here how can bars be luxurious and the flies playing at their doors? Flies, in fact, signify cheap and filthy places.

The issue of socio-linguistics in translation, on the other hand, has also drawn the attention of many scholars. Nida (1991, p. 25) confirms that the "relation between sociolinguistics and translation is a very natural one, since sociolinguists deal primarily with language as it is used by society in communicating," while Pinto (2012, p. 185) assures that "the attention given to Sociolinguistics by translation scholars needs to be considered within the broader context of what came to be called the "Cultural Turn".

Many translation theorists (e.g. Mona, 2002; Newmark, 1988; Nida, 1964; van Doorslaer, 2007) proposed different kinds of translation strategies which professional translators tend to use to overcome the difficulties in the translation process. Strategies such as insertion, deletion (omission), transliteration, substitution and addition will be referred to in the following discussion.

Two representative short stories

In this section, I will analyze two entire short stories taking the context as a primary element and showing how the socio-linguistic challenges associated with culture-specific words, colloquial words or expressions, cultural and literary allusions were the source of many translational problems hence hamper faithful translation.

Ya Khabiiir

The short story *Ya Khabiiir* is interspersed with various references; religious, cultural and historical. One of the problems that the translators face comes from the occurrence of homonyms; Longman dictionary (2001) defines a *homonym* as "a word that is spelt the same and sounds the same as another, but is different in meaning or origin". The story *Ya Khabiiir* is an excellent illustration to this point. The story revolves around a first-time encounter between two persons, the narrator and a "soldier". The confusion starts from the title itself *Ya Khabiiir* which consists of two parts. The first part is "Ya" which means in English "O or Oh" and the second is "Khabiiir" which means in Arabic standard an expert or an experienced person in any field or of any subject. The female name for it is *khabiiirah* (خبيرة) while the plural forms for the male and female are *khubara'a*, *khabiiirat* (خبيرات, خبراء) respectively. In Yemeni colloquial dialect, the matter is different as "khabiiir" is in Baker's (1992) definition a "culture-specific" word for it is a very common word implies the meaning of a friend. It is used politely to address a male person whom we do not know his name or we encounter for the first time, regardless of his social standard. This word has neither female nor plural forms. The standard form for *khabiiir* is *khabiri* (خبيري) that is similar to *sahibi* (صاحب), but it is commonly used with its abbreviated form *khabiiir*

(خبير) that is similar to sahib (صاحب). Hence, the best equivalent for this Yemeni specific word in English is a friend or a buddy as in spoken American English.

Within the context of the story, the word “khabiir” is first used by the “soldier” to draw the attention of the narrator to stop him from walking. The translators rendered this word literarily as an expert, i.e. “an address of respect for a learned professional” (p.79). Their comprehension of this word affects the progression of the theme and causes confusion in the translation process. The story begins when the narrator comes out from the governor's office because of “a law case”. He then encounters a “soldier” for the first time who calls him “ya khabiir”. The translators mistook the whole situation for they thought that since the narrator came out from the "governor's office" and that he was called “ya khabiir” by the “soldier”, then the word “ya khabiir” is translated into an expert presenting the narrator as a lawyer, “a learned professional person”. Weir (2001, p. 6) in her introduction underpinned the same mistake and considered the narrator as a lawyer. Reading and analyzing the events of the story carefully, one can recognize that the narrator is a villager. The events of the story were set in 1966 where Yemen was that time still a very primitive country to have the structure of the court system which includes lawyers. People who have law cases can go directly to the local governor. This can be apparent from the following three extracts:

(1) كنت عانداً من "حيفان" بعد أن قضيت فيها يومين في شريعة عند الحاكم. وكالعادة لم أخرج بنتيجة، فالشريعة ستستمر ولن تحل مطلقاً. ص ٧٥

I was on my own way back from Hayfan after spending two days on a law case at the governor's office. As usual, I didn't get any result. The legal procedures would continue, but nothing would be resolved. (p. 79)

(2) – ماه يا خبير كان معك شريعة؟ الله .. بلاكم أنتم يا أهل الحجرية بالشرايع .. كل من معه بقشنتين قام يشارع. ص ٧٧

“Ya Khabiir, did you have a law case? My God, what's it with you people from Hujariyyah, that makes you love going to court? Any one of you who has *two coins* in his pocket files a lawsuit.” (p. 80, author emphasis)

(3) - يا خبير واللي ينهب هانا ما هو أحسن من الحاكم .. أنت يا خبير تعطي الحاكم مئة ريال برضاك وقناعتك والعسكري تعطيه ريال وتقول للعسكر ينهبونا . ما هو كذا؟ العسكري مثل في حاكم ثاني ينهبه في بلاده بالحق أو بالباطل. ص ٧٨

“[...] Ya Khabiir. But, I say that whoever does loot and steal is no worse than the governor. You give the governor one hundred riyals under the table, but if you give a soldier one riyal, you say the soldiers looted and robbed you. Look, the soldier is no different from you; another governor steals from him in his own hometown, both justly and unjustly.” (p. 81)

Failing to observe the historical as well as the cultural background of the Yemeni society during that time leads to a flawed translation. It is very perceptible from these pieces of narrative that “the governor's office” is the place where the Yemeni people go to for their law cases. The word “court” (underlined in extract 2), is immaterially inserted to the translated version that does not exist in the Arabic one, and also translating the words “قام يشارع” to “files a lawsuit” (underlined

in extract 3), is far fitting to the current historical context of the story. Furthermore, the dealing between the people with law cases and “the governor” is direct without mediators which can be deduced from the following statement “You give the governor one hundred riyals under the table” (underlined in extract 3) which also indicates the corruption of the governors.

In view of that and in addition to the narrator's inner descriptions “many worries gnawing at me [...]” (p.79) reveal his frustration and oppression. The accounts “As much as I hated death, I detested soldiers even more. I hate soldiers. I fear them and have never walked with any of them” (ibid) cannot be ascribed to a lawyer who supposed to be audacious, but rather to a country farmer who is desperate with a deep hatred of the corrupt society he lives in. Toward the end of the story, it appears that the translators start to get baffled as to how to deal with the word “ya khabiir” for they realized that even the ignorant soldier is called “ya khabiir” by the narrator when he offers to put him up for a moonless night as his destination is still far. Thus, they opted for transliterating “يا خبير” into “ya khabiir” as the only option (underlined):

وأطلت تحت أقدامنا قريتي وبدون أن أدري كنت أقول له
– المفاليس يا خبير بعيدة والدنيا ليل لازم تبات الليلة عندنا والصبح يفرجها الله. ص ٧٩

I saw my village in the distance, and before I knew what I was saying, I said, “Ya Khabiir, you have a long way to go to reach Mafliss, and this is a moonless night; you should stay with us and leave in the morning.” (p. 82)

Readers, without doubt, will be in a state of uncertainty since the word “ya khabiir” is being previously translated as “an address of respect for a learned professional”. A further interesting point which shows how translating the word “ya khabiir” remains a stumbling block to the translators is when they rendered it differently into “sir” in the following fragment:

– والله يا خبير انني أشتهي الأولاد يكونوا متعلمين .. ما يكونوا عسكر مثلنا .. من غير علم. ص ٧٩

“Sir, I swear to God, I wish that my children would be educated and not become ignorant soldiers like me.” (p. 82)

Interestingly enough, the translators, seem to be unaware that they ultimately translated the word “الخبير” “khabiir” into its correct equivalent, in the Yemeni colloquial dialect, that is “a friend”:

ومع سيرنا كانت نسماط المساء تهب علينا بحنان وتتماوج أعواد الزرع على الأرض والخبير يتحدث عن
حاشد وصنعاء. ص ٧٩

As we walked, the evening breeze blew gently on us, moving the plants to and fro. My friend talked about Hashid and Sanaa (p. 82).

To sum up, translating the word “يا خبير” “ya khabiir” into three different meanings (a learned professional, sir and friend), in which the first contradicts the contextual meaning of the story, and also transliterated it seven times from the Arabic version “يا خبير” into “ya khabiir”, without adding a footnote explaining its meaning in Yemeni dialect, project the story as questionable.

Another socio-linguistic difficulty comes out from the treatment of the words “رعوي” and “الرعية”. During the course of the story, the “soldier” also addresses the narrator with the name of “رعوي” which is rendered into a civilian; whereas the narrator and his people were addressed with the name of “الرعية” which is rendered into civilians. Abdul-Wali himself was rather wrong with his use of the word “الرعية” as a plural form of “رعوي”. To my knowledge, most of native

speakers of Arabic do the same mistake. In Arabic, the word “الرعية” is a plural noun means one of these equivalents in English; subjects, citizens, people or country folk of a particular community, and there is no single form for it in Arabic except we say واحد من الرعية (i.e. one of the subjects, etc.). On the other hand, the plural form of رعي, which means in English a countryside farmer or a peasant, is رعيون (i.e. countryside farmers or peasants). At first, I found it quite tricky to determine what Abdul-Wali exactly meant by “رعي”. The translators have dealt with such incompatibility by translating the two words “رعي” and “الرعية” as civilian and civilians respectively. Arguably, their selection of the word civilians does not serve for a better comprehensibility of the translated version and transfer the cultural environment of the existing Yemeni society. This is because most of the Yemeni people are villagers who are peasants and small-scale farmers, besides, from the information contents provided it is obvious that the narrator is a villager “I saw my village in the distance” (p. 82), hence the word countryside farmer delivers a better corresponding word rather than the word civilian. More to the point, the following statement is uttered by the “soldier”:

اسمع يا خبير أنت رعي هانا في القبيطة وأنا رعي في حاشد [2] ص ٧٨
 “You live here in Qutabah and I live in Hashid.” (p. 81)

Both Arabic words “رعي” (underlined) are omitted in the translated version for no good reason, except for the assumption that the translators' conception is mixed up because the “soldier” as well as the narrator are now named “رعي”. The translators seem to not be able to digest the idea that a “soldier” and a “lawyer” can be simultaneously country farmers or peasants, hence they opted for omission. Besides, the footnote provided in the Arabic source is omitted in the translated version which spells out that Hashid is one of the biggest tribes in Yemen and consists of many villages. **The omission of the two words “رعي” together with the footnote, from the translated version, harm the sequence of the narrated events because their existence puts it in plain words that even people from tribal areas do not escape the oppression of their sheiks:**

هاناك المشايخ أخذوا الأرض، واحنا اصبحنا عساكر تدور على رزق على لقمة. ص ٧٨

“The sheiks took our land from us, and we became soldiers trying to get an income.”
 (p. 81)

It is true when Davies (2007) argues that omission has “sometimes provoked fierce protest, with the translators being accused of dishonest and deliberate distortion of the original” (56). Moreover, in the Yemeni colloquial meaning and based on historical context of the story, the word “عسكري” (the plural from is عساكر) which was rendered into “a soldier” does not mean a soldier who works for the government, but rather it is a title given for anyone who is oppressed and works for tribe leaders, normally he is a peasant. Therefore, to avoid any confusion and produce a smooth translation, it is best for the word “عسكري” to **be retained as a general name and transliterated into “as’kaari”**. In view of this, the translation, obviously, fails to convey the level of oppression and frustration in the lives of the Yemeni people of that time.

A further problem occurs in the translation is the mistreatment of the word “sheik/s”, “شيخ” (the plural is او مشايخ) also spelled sheikh or shaikh. Sheik in Arabic has four connotations; the first is a tribe leader, second is a Muslim religious leader or a scholar (a

religious faqeeh), third is an Arab ruler or prince and forth an elderly man. Within the story, Abdul-Wali talks negatively about the first and the second types of sheiks:

ما معنا أرض .. هاتاك المشايخ أخذوا الأرض . ص٧٨

[W]e have no money, no land. The sheiks took our land from us. (p. 81)

والفقهاء ألعن من الحكام، همهم البيس.. والله وبالله إنهم ما يعرفوا معنى القرآن بس يكذبوا على خلق الله، افسدوا الدنيا يكذبهم. ص٧٩

[A] religious *faqeeh*. These people are even worse than governors. All they care about is money. As God is my witness, I tell you, they don't know the meaning of the Quran. They lie to us. (p. 82, translators emphasis)

Anyone who is familiar with the Yemeni socio-cultural and tribal dominant power in the rural areas which still exists until now, can easily differentiate between the two fragments of the narrative and recognize that the first mention of sheiks refers to the tribe leaders. For any ordinary reader who reads Yemeni literature for the first time, on the other hand, could easily be under a false impression that the first mention of sheiks can also refer to Muslim scholars; this in its turn can cause misinterpretation as well as more offence to Muslims readers. To paint the two pieces of narrative plainly and prevent any uncertainty from the target readers, the translators should make it lucid either by replacing the word sheiks with the phrase the tribe leaders or by adding a footnote explaining to whom the word sheiks stands for in context of the story as a whole.

1.1. The Ghoul

The story "The Ghoul" is also another interesting example of how misunderstanding the Yemeni *colloquial* expressions exploited leads to an unreliable translation that distorts the overall interpretation of the story. "The Ghoul" is a fable between the ghoul "evil spirit" (Weir 2001: 5) who symbolizes the repression of the Imam (the ruler) of North Yemen and a widow, a young person called Hind, who represents the power which annihilates such suppression (see Weir for a succinct introduction, *ibid.*, 5). In Yemeni *colloquial* expressions, the word "العجوز" is a figurative word which can be used metaphorically to mock a young person whom we think is feeble. Translating this word literarily as an old person should be either dealt with caution or a footnote should be provided otherwise it will be deceptive, especially in the context of this story. Let us first look at the accounts attributed to Hind throughout the story, the key words are underlined:

كان لها طفل صغير في العاشرة تركه لها زوجها الذي مات في أعماق البحار. ص١٩

[...] she had a son, ten years old, whom her husband had left behind when he died at sea.

(P. 70)

المسكينة لم تكن تعلم ففقدت كل شيء ولم يبق لها سوى شيء واحد: جسدها. ص١٩

Slowly she lost everything. Nothing was left but one thing: her body.... (p. 70)

وسالت الدماء من كل جزء من جسدها الفتى. ص٢٣

[...] blood was splattered all over her young body.... (p. 73)

وشعرها الأسود الناعم الذي لم تهتم به يوماً من الأيام كان قد استرسل على كتفيها. ص٢٣

Her straight black hair, which she had never taken care of, hung loose over her shoulders.... (p. 73)

أنت أول من حطم صمتي.. ومن تحدى قوتي. ص٢١

“You are the first to ever break my peace and challenge my strength.” (p.72)

These accounts show unmistakably that Hind is a young person. The translators appeared befuddled between their literal understanding of the word “العجوز” as an old person and the given description of Hind. How a woman who has a ten-years-old boy, who wants to sell her body for money, who has a young body and a black hair and who challenges the ghoul can be an old woman? For that reason, the translators effortlessly were forced to word replacement and omission as a solution to avoid the likely inconsistency which may occur due to their mistaken literal understanding of the word “العجوز”. Their misinterpretation is materialized clearly through the following translated fragment. When the ghoul saw the woman coming to challenge him, he wanted to ask her about the reason of her coming:

وأراد الغول أن يسأل المرأة الجسور التي حطمت بتصميمها وإرادتها أسطوره عن سبب مجيئها. ص ٢١
 “Why are you here, old woman?” the ghoul asked. (p. 71)

The word “الجسور” (underlined) which means courageous is replaced with the phrase “old woman” possibly to avoid any contradiction may occur between such word and the translators’ initial understanding of the nature of the woman. This is because a courageous person is the one who deals with danger or difficult situations with bravery and self-confidence; such description cannot be given to an old woman. Another example which highlights the misunderstanding of the word “العجوز” is through translating the first utterance of the face to face encounter between the ghoul and Hind:

-اسمعي أيتها العجوز! أنت أول من حطم صمتي.. ومن تحدى قوتي. ص ٢١
 "Oh, you old woman, listen to me. You are the first to ever break my peace and challenge my strength.” (p.72)

The challenge of the translation here is to capture the tone of the ghoul’s speech to Hind which is performed as an exclamatory sentence. In the translated version, his speech is presented as an interjected sentence using the interjection “Oh”. From a language perspective, there is no semantic difference between the two speeches and both mean pretty much the same thing, however, the exclamation mark normally acts as the written equivalent of a raised voiced that indicates strong feelings such as surprise. Here the contradiction and the uncertainty in the translation suffice it enough to bring out the translated story as ambiguous, fabricated and questionable.

2. Conclusion

It has been argued that in order to retain the unique Yemeni ethos of the short stories and to produce a reliable translation, the translators should take the historical elements, structural levels, context, and the socio-cultural background including religious differences of the source text as determinants in the process of translation. Literary translation must work as a bridge between two target cultures presenting others in a satisfying manner otherwise it may risk creating assorted forms of infuriating misunderstanding leading to a faulty translation. There should be a sense of solidarity which creates a readiness to share with others, which in turn underpins a prosperous piece of translation. To conclude, there are other numerous translational problems associated with culture, lexis, omission, semantics, style, syntax, grammar, and even typo that still need to be explored systematically through a further study.

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