

**THE INFLUENCE OF THE TRANSLATOR'S CULTURAL BACKGROUND ON TRANSLATING  
ARABIC LITERARY TEXTS INTO ENGLISH- COMPARING THE TRANSLATION OF I SAW  
RAMALLAH AND I WAS BORN THERE; I WAS BORN HERE AS A CASE STUDY**

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**Abstract**

In this research, the researcher aims at investigating the impact of the translator's cultural background on translating Arabic cultural-literary texts into English with a specific reference to the translation of I Saw Ramallah, and I Was Born There; I Was Born Here. The researcher compares the translated version of I Saw Ramallah - and the translated version of the I Was Born There; I Was Born Here using analytical, descriptive, and qualitative methodology. The researcher compares the translated books to determine how the translator's cultural background affects the translation of the source text under the hypothesis that the translator mastering the source text culture is more faithful and adequate to the source text than the translator who doesn't master the culture of the source text. Besides, the translator mastering the source text culture keeps the source text language and culture flavor and doesn't keep using deletion. This research's importance stems from the fact that translation and culture are connected and overlapped topics that influence each other. Therefore, cultural gaps are considered a crucial factor affecting the translation process. Despite the language being used to express the culture, as many scholars such as Nord, Venuti, and Rabadan pointed out, translating cultural, literary terms and expressions causes many problems for translators, especially those who don't master the culture of both texts. "Differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than make differences in language structure." (Nida, 1964; 50). Therefore, this research is fundamental and adds to translation studies in the cultural and literary fields.

**Key words:** Translation, Cultural Background, Cultural Literary Texts, Translation Strategies, Source-Language, Target Language, Speech Acts, Conversational Implicature.

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## Introduction

The translation process is not one-sided. It is a complicated process influenced by various types of factors. The translator's linguistic and cultural background is one of the most crucial factors that affect the process of translation. Translation theory states that the process of translation is "unidirectional." It has been supposed that the translators best translate into their mother tongue language (Baker, 1992/2011). So out of this claim, the researcher examined whether the translator's linguistic/cultural background affects the translation of the source texts and to see whether the culture and language of the translator's mother tongue contribute to producing a translation that is more source language directed or more target language controlled.

Cultural translation is the most problematic type for many translators since it deals with translating language structures as a part of the culture. (Bassnett-McGuire, 1980, Larson, 1984, Farghal, 1995, Baker, 1996). The translation is both linguistically and culturally a replacement for the original. The rendering of cultural messages in translation is just as important as the conversion of two languages, and it is usually the most challenging part. Thus, due to cultural differences, intended audience expectations and understanding of the translated texts differ from the audience who reads the originals. That assures that translation is not only a transfer of words but it is an exchange between cultures. (Li, 2014)

*I Saw Ramallah* and *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* are Arabic literary genres written by the outstanding Palestinian writer Mourid Barghouti. They are very precious books in which Mourid manifests many social, national, and political issues and talks about his life on borders, exile, and his journey of coming back to Palestine. In addition, the writer wrote about his son's displacement and many other heart-wrenching events illustrated in both books. However, the former, *I Saw Ramallah*, is translated by Ahdaf Soueif, an Egyptian translator. The latter, *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*, is translated by a British translator, Humphrey Davies. The researcher has been motivated by the idea that these books are for the same writer. They have much in common; however, they are translated by translators with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Nevertheless, since the books have much in common, it is easier for the researcher to evaluate the influence of the differences in the cultural and linguistic backgrounds on the translation of Arabic literary terms into English.

## Translation and Culture

House states that translation is a linguistic and cultural activity. Translators cannot separate language from culture because translation is "an act of communication across cultures" (House, 2009). "Differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure." (Nida, 1964; 50). The translation is the mediator between languages, societies, and literature. It is the way to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers (House, 2001). The translation process is a transfer between two cultures. Thus, the translator should have two cultures or more (Vermeer's 1986)

Linguistics is a language scientific study that has three main elements: the language form, the language meaning, and the language in context (Ngozi, 2016). Many scholars such as Nord, Venuti, and Rabadan state that language is the way to express the culture and the individuality of its speaker. Since literature is a very important part of a nation's culture, translating literary expressions is problematic for translators. Gorjan (1970) maintains, "Translators can strive to come as close to the original as possible, but they never can or will achieve complete identity in their translations". Nida (1964: 164; see also Munday 2008: 42) states that successful translation requires four elements. The first one is making sense; the second one is transferring the spirit and the manner of the source text; the third one is

getting the easy and natural form of the terms and expressions, and the last one is “producing a similar response”

Williams (2009, p. 7) states that translation is considered an intellectual and sophisticated product. It is a process that involves continuous assessments of TL equivalents to SL lexical items before deciding on which TL equivalent is closest and the most suitable (Munday, 2012). Although international and local standards of translation exist, a general framework for evaluating translation does not exist (Williams, 2009, p. 3). Although translation has a significant role in the intervention and cultural communication (Munday, 2007), translation studies have hardly paid any attention to translation evaluation (Munday, 2012, p. 12). The translation process is considered “unidirectional” It has been argued that translators are most effective in translating into their mother tongue (Baker, 1992, 2011).

Baker (1992/2011) points out that translators best translate to their mother tongue language. This claim will be examined to see who achieves better translation for the Arabic literary text, the Egyptian translator or the British. In other words, when does the English translation of both books accomplish a high level of cultural and linguistic equivalence? Does the Egyptian translator keep the source text's beauty, flavor, quality, or meaning more than the British translator?

According to Pike (1990, p. 77), the outsider translator must have the ability to speak like an insider, think like an insider, and act like an insider (as judged by insiders). The translator's emic knowledge helps him/her understand and handle the cultural aspects of a different culture. In this process, the translator uses her/his cultural background and presuppositions, thus analyzing the source culture from an outsider's perspective. Once the translator understands a particular cultural phenomenon or concept (guided by the surrounding environment and context information), they gradually begin to set aside their cultural assumptions and move toward a deeper understanding of ST and culture. The translator has achieved a native-like knowledge of the ST and is, therefore, an insider of that culture. Only then does the actual translation process begin. After the translator has gained a native-like understanding of ST, he starts comparing the translations of the source text (Hu, 2018).

Some researchers like Akan, Karim, and Chowdhury (2019, p.60) point out some translation problems cannot only be on the level of equivalence of the words or expressions in the dictionaries, they can also be on the level of grammar, word, style, sound and/or usage of the concerning languages. They conclude that translating Arabic texts into English needs an enormous “bilingual expertise” Furthermore, the translator should have an excellent religious and cultural background in both languages. The researchers, Al-sohbani and Muthanna (2013), confirm that “lexical knowledge insufficiency; inadequate knowledge and practice of grammar; inadequate cultural backgrounds; and inappropriate teaching atmosphere and methodology” are the main problems. These challenges lead to an essential need to reform the curriculum, pedagogy, and class size.

In the *Book of Animals*, al-Jāhiz pointed out that the translator should master both source language and target language, have good knowledge of the structure of language, and be familiar with the people's culture (peoples' way of living and understanding each other). He also paid attention to the translator's knowledge/ unfamiliarity with the source text and its subjects (Almanna, 2013)

## Methodology

### 1. Data

The corpus of this study is based on the data taken from *I Was Born There; I Was Born Here* translated into Arabic by a British translator, Humphrey Davies, and the novel *I Saw Ramallah*, translated by Ahdaf Soueif an Egyptian translator. Both novels were written by

the same author Mourid Barghouti. The two books have much in common. They have almost very similar events, and there are many similar expressions and terms in both novels. The researcher will compare and analyze the translations of these novels and assess the influence of the translator's background on the translation product.

## 2. Issued addressed

This paper investigates two issues: examining the theoretical frame that claims that "the translator best translate into their language of habitual use for the reason of the idiomaticity". It will also examine the questions: How would the translation of the Arabic literary texts differ when the translator is not an Arabic native speaker? Would this affect the accuracy, the quality, the beauty, the naturalness, and the flow of the translation product?

## 3. Procedure

The researcher uses the analytical descriptive comparative method. The procedures utilized in this study include citing a collection of expressions from the two books that were deemed worthy of investigation since they speak highly of the person in question and the culture to which he belongs. The researcher analyzes and compares the translated excerpts from both novels to examine the influence of the translator's cultural and linguistic background and to investigate whether the translator's tongue and culture influence the process and the product of translation.

## Discussion and Data Analysis

This study is distinguished from other studies analyzing texts translated from Arabic into English since the given texts have emotional and factual content. Besides, the assigned texts contain many culturally bound terms and expressions that are considered problematic for translators. The translation should tell "the intended interpretation without putting the audience to unnecessary processing effort" (Gutt, 1991). In this study, while analyzing, criticizing, and comparing the expressions and terms translated by translators with different cultural backgrounds, I will focus on some problems translating the given texts from other points of view. I will also focus on the strategies used in translating some expressions, trying to shed light on the influence of the translator's identity on the translation.

## Semantic Translation

Semantic translation is the translation at the text or author level (Farghal, 2012). Newmark, 1981 suggests that "semantic translation is the most appropriate translation for literary and religious writing as well as works of outstanding value where individualistic expression of the original author is given priority." (Almanna, 2013), however, in the following excerpt from, *I Saw Ramallah*, the semantic translation was not the best choice since it causes nuances and a lack of the exact meaning of the source text term:

"نهضوا بقاماتهم وقتابيزهم وحطاتهم البيضاء ووجههم على الفور" p.102

The translator, Ahdaf Soueif, translated it into:

**"They stood up in front of me in their bodies, their clothes, their white headdresses, their faces. They stood up as though they had not died."** P.68

The Egyptian translator used semantic translation to translate the whole excerpt. Translating the words قتابيزهم وحطاتهم is challenging for the translator since they are cultural specific expressions, and there are no a correspondence to these words in the target language. However, translating these words into the closest equivalents (clothes, headdresses), having the same function but not the same significance in the target language, was not the best choice. They don't reflect the same shade of the meaning in

Arabic, and they don't have the same impact on the target reader. As a translator, it would be better if the translator used transliteration, definition, or footnotes.

In the following example from *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*:

"حطته وعقاله" p15 line 16

The British translator translated it into:

"His kufiya and the cord that keeps it in place" P 6 L 24

On the contrary of the Egyptian translator, he used cultural borrowing and definition strategies instead of semantic translation. The translator should give more explanation for the word kufiya since the target readers are not familiar with this term.

The following is another example of the usage of the semantic translation that distorts the pragmatic meaning of the source text words:

"مسخن" و "طابون" p.94 from *I Saw Ramallah*

Translated into "food" and "oven" p. 62.

In this example, the translator, Ahdaf Soueif, used a semantic translation that made little sense in the target language. The words "oven" and "food" don't have the same significance that the source text words have. They are also not accurate. Thus, it would be workable and better to search for a similar and conventionalized term in the target text.

Hatim and Mason (1990) state that the translator needs more than knowing the lexical meaning to solve pragmatic difficulties. The only way to solve this problem is to use a transliteration strategy giving some details and descriptions in the footnotes.

In the following examples from *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*; the British translator used semantic translation. However, the semantic translation was not the best choice since it distorts the source text expressions' social and pragmatic meaning. Besides, it harms the spiritual and expressive value of the source text expressions:

P12 L 19 "الله يهداها على شارون يا رب"

He translated it into:

**"Lord, bring it all down on Sharon's head!" P 4 L 3**

The semantic translation was not the best choice since it makes little sense in English. It would be better and workable if the translator kept the excerpt's social and cultural meaning if the translator translated it into "may God ruins Sharon's days/ life."

The second example from *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* is when the British translator used semantic translation and failed to convey the intended meaning of the source text.

"بلادي سامحينا ان خطينا قصدناكي ونحو غيرك خطينا ومثل النقش في ثوبك خيطينا" p 140

The translator translated it into:

**"My country, forgive us if we've**

**sinned.**

**We set off to come to you but to others inclined.**

**Stitch us in with the threads of your robe's design" P 104**

The translator used "to others inclined" to translate the source text expression "نحو غيرك". He also used "stitch us in with the threads of your robe's design" to translate the source text expression "في ثوبك خيطينا". However, it is difficult for the target texts' readers to deduce the precise intended meaning based on the semantic translations. Hence, it would be clearer and more accurate to translate if the translator translated the "نحو غيرك خيطينا" into "but we changed our destination and went to another country" and "في ثوبك خيطينا" into "hold on to us" or "stick to us."

Ahdaf Soueif, in her translation of *I Saw Ramallah*, frequently used the semantic translation strategy failing to convey the meaning in its cultural and social contexts. For example:

She translated "من شان الله يا مرید.....عشان نظل واقفين على رجلينا" in the excerpt "من شان الله يا مرید.....عشان نظل واقفين على رجلينا" p. 34 into **"Calm down, so that we can stay on our feet..." p.17.**

The translator needs to be aware of the intended meaning in the source text; s/he needs to "examine similar speech acts in the target language to choose one that performs the same illocution" (Almanna & Farghal, 2014). "واقفين على رجلينا" means to stay strong and independent in the source language context. The semantic translation for this excerpt harms the source text's meaning and distorts the pragmatic sense.

The other example in which the translator, Ahdaf Soueif, failed to convey the intended meaning of the source text by translating it into semantic equivalence is:

"على قلبي زي العسل" p.167

Translated into the **"It's like honey on my heart"** p.115. This translation makes little sense in the English language, and it is difficult for the target reader to grasp the intended meaning since they don't master the Arab culture. It would be workable and more acceptable to translate it into "it is my pleasure."

### **Other translation strategies used in translating some terms and expressions in *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here.***

الكاكي translated into "Alkaki". The translation of this word in Arabic is "The light green"  
لون التوتياء translated into "the colour of zinic". The translation of this word in Arabic is "the raspberry color"

الحلابات translated into "an apt name" which would be more acceptable and comprehensible if the translator translated it into "metal checkpoints".

The omission is a translation strategy in which the translator omits some terms for some reasons. "The main reason for such reduction is when the element is not important to the development of the text and omitting it does not harm the author's intentions or alter the text-type focus, but, on the contrary, retaining it in the TT might complicate the

structure and strike the TL receptor as unusual" (Almanna, 2013). However, the translator, in translating the book *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* omitted complete paragraphs and expressions. He deleted more than three paragraphs (he deletes the paragraphs that describe Hussien Barghouti's death). He seriously fails to convey the source text content, harms the author's attention, and alters the text-type focus. The translator used the lexical calque strategy in translating different words. He transliterates them, keeping the syntactic structure of the TL and giving a new mode of expression (Almanna, 2013). Here are some words from the book, *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*, transliterated into English:

Example 1:

الطربوش P86

Translation: tarbushes. P 62

Example 2:

رظف الطابون p.138

Translation: Ruzuf P 103

Example 3:

الميجانا والدلعونا P 139 L 2

Translation: The ;ataba mijana, and dal, ona p. 104

And other examples like : المقاطعة The Muqata,a قلندهار Qalandahar, and الغيتو Ghettoes.

The translator tends to use this strategy when there is no equivalence for these terms in the target language. Using this strategy could enrich the target language, bridge the gaps between English and Arabic, and keep the beauty and the flavor of the source text language and culture. Thus, it would be preferable to use this strategy in translating some ST terms

and words that do not have a precise equivalent instead of giving the semantic translation for these words like what Ahdaf Soueif did in translating the words "المسخن" and "الطابون"

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this research, the researcher concludes that there is no big influence of the translator's cultural and linguistic background on translating the texts into English. Both translators fail in conveying the pragmatic implicature of some source text excerpts. However, the British translator seriously fails to translate some words like "الحلابات" and "لون". He uses cultural borrowing or what is the so-called lexical calque in translating many words since he doesn't have enough knowledge about these words.

Based on the analysis of the translations excerpts from both books, both translators, the Egyptian and the British translators, tend to use semantic translation strategies rather than other translation strategies. However, the semantic translation strategy was not the best choice in translating some terms and expressions since it distorts the pragmatic meaning of the source texts terms and expressions; and it fails to convey the intended purpose in its cultural and social significance. On the other hand, the British translator badly harms the source text when he deletes complete paragraphs (p. 166/167). The deleted paragraphs contain many expressions, terms, ideas, and messages about important events for the author of the source text.

Throughout this research and based on the researcher's previous knowledge about translating Arabic literary texts, the researcher recommends conducting other studies evaluating Arabic literary texts translated into English by translators with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

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