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The translator's half visibility. A qualitative/quantitative study of culture-specific items in Said Khatibi's "Hatabu Sarajevo" and its English version "Sarajevo Firewood" by Paul Starkey.

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Abstract

This research paper examines the question of rendering Islamic items from Arabic into English. Based on an Algerian Arabic expression literary work and its newly published English version, the debatable issue revolves around the presentation of some culture-specific items in the source text and how they are rendered in the target language/culture. Using Venuti's foreignization and domestication model, and considering the new globalized writing and reading conditions, this qualitative study aims to highlight the frequency of these two main strategies in transferring words and expressions revealing the Islamic identity. The results reveal the translator's general tendency to keep a balance between the original's strangeness on the one hand, by using some extreme foreignization strategies like transcription, and on the other hand by turning the target reader's expression habits eminent by exploring different domestication strategies such as absolute universalization.

Keywords: Culture-specific items, domestication, foreignization, translator's visibility.

1. Introduction

Among the most discussed problematic aspects in literary translation, there are those tied to culture-specific items presented in works in various ways and for different reasons. The transfer burden gets heavier when it comes to translating novels written by Arab/Muslim authors and intended to western readership, and in which translators have constantly the choice to be visible, or not, while rendering the abundant words and expressions with religious reference.

The translator's visibility has long been measured according to the domestication and foreignization paradigm. This latter suggests that every translational act results necessarily in either a wholly domesticated version or in a totally foreignized one. However, with the notion of «*foreignness*» shrinking down, and that of «*distances*» being shortened between the target readership and the source religion-related cultural context under the effect of globalization, we suppose that the above statement began to change and therefore studies carried out on the foreignization/domestication's dichotomy in translated works should focus on the translator's roaming between the two. In fact, other possibilities are already noticeable in lately translated versions getting more and more non-ethnocentric: the translator's visibility and/or invisibility are turning into a half visibility since either keeping the strangeness of the original seems to be no longer the ultimate objective of translation acts.

To illustrate such a turning point and find out how true this hypothesis can be, a quantitative and qualitative study is brought on the new edition of the first and the only English version of the Arabic expression Algerian novel (Hatabu Sarajevo) written by Said khatibi. It sheds light on the most used strategies in terms of rendering Islamic culture-specific items from an original writing context into a target reading one. This study aims at answering the following questions:

- How are Islamic culture-specific items presented in the source text?
- Which linguistic and discursive functions do these items fulfil?
- And how are these items rendered and presented in the target text?

The present study's novelty can be seen on two distinct levels: first, through the introduction of the notion of "*half visibility*" to express the translator's position between the already known and recognized two positions, namely visibility and invisibility; and second, via the corpus choice since the examined translated version of the novel has not been analysed in any previous study, which makes the present paper the first to deal with the translator's behaviour towards the culture specific items in this specific work.

2. Literature review and theoretical background

2.1 Translating literature as a decision-making process

For more than two centuries, one single vision had long been dominating the reflexion on literary translation strategies and summarizing the translator's behaviour towards a foreign

text: «*Either the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him, or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him*» (Schleiermacher, 1813, in Venuti, 19: 1995). In other words, if the translator shows a tendency for the target language by omission and substitution, that means that he uses domestication; and if he keeps the foreign and exotic aspects of the source text, he adopts a foreignizing strategy. (Chouit, 73: 2019).

The two above-mentioned strategies directly relate to the visibility or invisibility of the translator inside his text. In other words, choosing to be invisible requires the use of as many domesticating strategies as possible, in order to make the target reader feel as if the text has been naturally written in his own language and culture context, this is on the one hand. On the other hand, to be visible refers to making a sort of pressure on the target language cultural values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the source text. (Venuti, 1998)

2.2 Islamic items as (very) specific culture items

Beyond its basic definition, the notion of culture-specific items was conferred a very narrow definition within the translation studies, based on its implication in the transfer act and the challenges it represents for translators. Aixelá identifies them as:

“Actualized items whose function and connotation in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the nonexistence of the referred item or of its different inter-textual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text” (Aixelá, 58:1996).

Schwarz also refers to culture-bound terms and defines them as “*concepts in any language that are unique to that language or to the culture associated with that language and create a cultural gap between speakers of different languages*”. (Schwarz, 14: 2002).

In this respect and in reference to this research material, the presence of religious specific items in Arabic expression literary works is explained by two main facts describing the intimate relation between Arabic language and Islamic identity:

- Firstly, Arabic is the language of Islam as The Quran is delivered in it, and all the Hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad are too. This systematically implies that all references to the Islamic religion are in this language. They are either in classical Arabic, maintaining their original transcriptions, such as in the expression “إنا لله و إنا إليه راجعون”, or in dialect, undergoing some superficial transformations while keeping their initial meanings and basic values, as in the locution “قباض لروح” which is a dialectal form of the standard collocation “قباض الروح”, synonym of “ملك الموت” (the angel of death).

- Secondly, the vast majority of Muslims are practicing ones. This fact entails that the indicators of Islamic culture are highly noticeable in their daily life, and any literary work produced in this context must inevitably contain several forms of their religious identity.

As a matter of fact, Chikha mentions that, in the North African context, religion represents an outstanding moral value for the people of the Maghreb, and subsequently for Maghrebi writers simply because it is a daily surrounding for them. This influence is visible whether the writers are believers or not. They carry a totalizing superego, which is strongly tied to the Islamic religion because Islam for them is a totality, permeating theoretically all their life. (Chikha, 1987).

Considering Khatibi's novel that is the corpus data of this research paper, it is worth mentioning that it is partly based on the memories and experiences of the people who survived the atrocities of the Algerian civil strife witnessed during the 1990's. Thus, the marks of religion-related items are omnipresent among chapters' acts and deeds. The author used them generously to describe his characters with their everyday life actions. In chapter three, for instance, the narrator, who is the main character, presents a portrait of his father, based mostly on his identity as a practising Muslim. Here is an extract:

Source text example:

«قُبلت رأس الحاجّ وفتح فمه كما لو أنه يودّ قول شيء ما، ثم صمت وخرجت محبباً تاركاً إياه يستغفر ويسبح ويحمدل، هي الكلمات الوحيدة التي مازال يذكرها فقد نسي قصار السور وترك الصلاة التي طالما حرص عليها في الماضي أبداً حرصاً. في البداية توقّف عن الذهاب إلى المسجد تنازل عن مكانه الأثير في الصفّ الأول، خلف الإمام مباشرة، تخلّى عن سجادته التي تعلق بها ومنع غيره من الصلاة عليها كما لو أنها بساط علاء الدين ثم بات يجمع الصلوات مع بعضها بعضاً وشيئاً فشيئاً انقطع عن الرّكوع والسّجود نهائياً». (خطيبي، 2019، ص. 32-33)

Target text example:

«I kissed Hajj's head and he opened his mouth as though he wanted to say something then fell silent. I left disappointed, leaving him to beg God for mercy, praising him and giving him thanks. They were the only words he could still remember. He had forgotten the short suras and given up prayers, which he had often been very fond of in the past. At first, he stopped going to the mosque and gave up his preferred place in the first row, directly behind the imam. He gave up his mat, which he had held on to and prevented anyone else from praying on as if it were Aladdin's magic carpet, then he had started gradually to mix up prayers until finally, he stopped bowing and prostrating himself altogether». (Khatibi, 24-25: 2021).

Through the passage and regarding the words and expressions underlined in it, it is to note that the author does not only take the religious identity of his character as a narrative support, but also conceives it as an essential element to describe him as a devout Muslim. This is well displayed in describing him performing the pilgrimage, making sure to be right behind the imam in performing prayer in the mosque, reciting discreetly formulas for expiation and praise, etc.

3. Corpus presentation and methodology

The chosen corpus is constituted of the original version of «حطب سراييفو», written by the Algerian author Said Khatibi and published in Algeria in 2019, this is on the one hand. On the

other hand, there is its English version «*Sarajevo Firewood*», translated from Arabic by Paul Starkey and edited in London in 2020.

The choice of the corpus was founded on the study objectives: according to the English version publisher (Banipal Books), "*Sarajevo Firewood*" narrates the lives of two main characters, with their friends and families: Salim, an Algerian journalist, and Ivana, a young Bosnian woman. Both have fled the destruction and hatred of their own countries to try and build a new life in Slovenia. As Ivana pursues her goal of writing her "dream play", Khatibi's novel brings to life in a quite fictional form the memories and experiences of the countless ordinary people who survived the atrocities linking the two countries. (Banipal Books, in Khatibi, 2021).

As far as the translator is concerned, Paul Starkey is a British writer and translator who studied Arabic and Persian at Oxford University. He has translated a number of Arabic novels into English. Therefore, he perfectly represents the image of a translator who does not share the same cultural and linguistic background with the source text writer.

In order to draw limits to this study and carry out an in-depth analysis, and among a range of culture-specific elements found in the novel varying from artistic, social, material among others, we have tackled those referring to the Islamic identity, presented in form of terms and expressions and considered as very specific-cultural items related to religion. Along the 327 pages, we selected 30 items. As to the qualitative analysis and for the sake of methodological efficacy, the research was traced according to the following analytical procedures:

- Quote the original passage in which the religious expression appears,
- analyse its nature and its semantic and pragmatic function in the source context,
- quote the translation of the passage in the English version, and
- comment on and criticize the translation according to the aforementioned theoretical postulates which form the basis of this study.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Quantitative discussion

The following table displays the religious culture terms and expressions found in the novel, put in a table and classified according to the strategy and the procedure adopted in their translation:

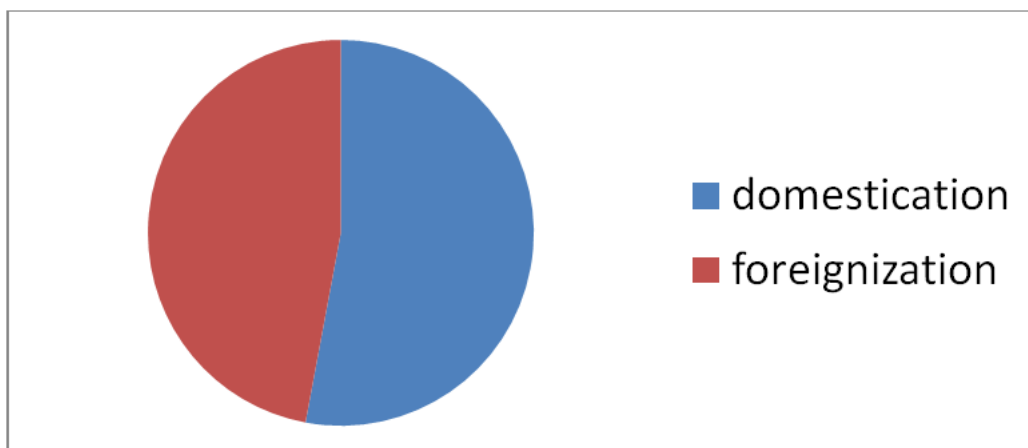
Table N°01: Religion-specific items with strategies used in their translation

| Religious cultural item/expression in the ST | Equivalent item/expression in the TT | Translation strategy | Translation procedure |
|--|---|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| إنا لله و إنا إليه راجعون. ص. 12 | we are God's and to God will we return. p. 04 | domestication/ foreignization | repetition/ equivalence |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|----------------|------------------------------|
| أولياء الله. ص. 12 | God's holy men. p. 04 | Domestication | Equivalence |
| الدرأويش. ص. 12 | Dervishes. p.04. | Foreignization | borrowing |
| إفطار / رمضان. ص. 13 | Iftar/ramadan. P. 05. | Foreignization | Borrowing Transcription |
| عيد الفطر. ص. 29 | Eid al-fitr. p. 21 | Foreinization | Transcription |
| آية الكرسي. 29 | a verse of Qur'an. p.21. | Domestication | Omission |
| النسخ. ص. 29 | Naskh. p. 21 | Foreignization | Transcription |
| الحاج. ص. 29 | the Hajj. p. 22. | Foreignization | Transcription |
| الحج. ص. 30 | pilgrimage. p. 22 | Domestication | Absolute universalization |
| قصار السور . ص. 32 | short suras. p.24 | Foreignization | Transcription |
| يستغفر / يسيح / يحمدل. ص. 32 | beg God for mercy/ praise God, give God thanks. p 24. | Domestication | equivalence |
| الله غالب. ص. 34 | p.24. Ø | Domestication | omission |
| مديح الرسول و الصحابة. ص. 51 | praise of the Prophet and his companions. p. 41 | Domestication | naturalization |

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| | | | |
|--|---|----------------|---------------------------|
| قرآن ص 52 | Quran. p.43 | Foreignization | borrowing |
| الله أكبر !! ص.52 | my God!! p. 43 | Domestication | Absolute universalization |
| الفاتحة على روحها. ص.53 | The fatiha for her soul. p. 43 | Foreignization | Calque/borrowing |
| نواظير الأرواح. ص. 65 | Islamistes. p.58 | Domestication | synonymy |
| إن عدتم عدنا. ص. 65 | If you come back, we will come back. p, 55 | Foreignization | calque |
| انتقلت إلى رحمة الله. ص. 54 | Passed into the mercy of God. P. 44 | Foreignization | calque |
| اللطف يا رب . ص. 54 | Lord have mercy 70 | Domestication | equivalence |
| سامحها الله في دارها الأخرى. ص.55 | May God forgive her in her other abode. p.68 | Foreignization | calque |
| ربي يفرج. ص.86 | God will provide.p.76 | Domestication | equivalence |
| بقدرته قادر. ص. 112 | Through the power of God. p.101 | Domestication | simplification |
| الحمد لله . ص.156. | Thanks be to God. p. 142 | Domestication | equivalence |
| حسبي الله و نعم الوكيل. ص.158 | God is the best of supporters. p. 144 | Domestication | explication |
| الحمد لله الذي أنزل على عبده الكتاب و لم يجعل له عوجا. ص.227 | Praise to God who revealed his book to his servant and he didn't make for him any deviation. p. 209 | Foreignization | calque |
| غسلوه. ص.238. | They washed him. p.211 | Domestication | naturalization |
| هل أذن العصر. ص. 260 | Have we had the afternoon call to the prayer yet? p. 248 | Domestication | explication |
| خاف ربي. ص.267 | God help you. p. 247 | Domestication | adaptation |
| إن شاء الله. ص.281 | Insha'allah. p. 260 | Foreignization | transcription |
| عظم الله أجركم. ص. 77 | May God grant you a good reward. p. 256 | Foreignization | calque |



| | | | |
|-------------------------------|--|----------------|--------|
| ربي يرحمه و يوسع عليه.ص.77 | May the Lord have mercy on him and ease his path. p. 257 | Foreignization | calque |
|-------------------------------|--|----------------|--------|

Based on the statistics provided in the table above, the proportions of the two main strategies use are as follows:

Figure N° 01: Domestication and foreignization use proportions

As far as the quantitative findings are concerned, the research generated the following general statements

- Being the two main strategies used in the translation of the novel, foreignization and domestication have been used so equally that it seems impossible to refer to a translator's tendency to one to the detriment of the other.
- Equivalence is the predominant domestication procedure, since half of the domesticated items have been translated by their equivalents in the target language/culture.
- The translation demarche is in general unclear, even somehow contradictory. In other words, domestication was used in the dialogue segments, that means that the

characters' direct speech was changed in order to adapt it and make the culture specific situation comprehensible to the target reader. That was the case for example (28) in the table above, in which the meaning of the item «أذان العصر», uttered by a character, was rendered by explication «*the afternoon call to the prayer*». Hence, explication remains one of the most used domestication procedures.

- The translator sometimes moves from one extreme to the other in translating the same categories of items, in spite of the possibility of unifying the procedure. That was the case of the specific terms referring to Islamic practices and rites. For example, «الحج» was translated by its absolute universal equivalent «*pilgrimage*», while «إفطار» was simply transcribed by «*iftar*» instead of the absolute universalized expression «*break the fast*».

This movement can be drawn as follows:

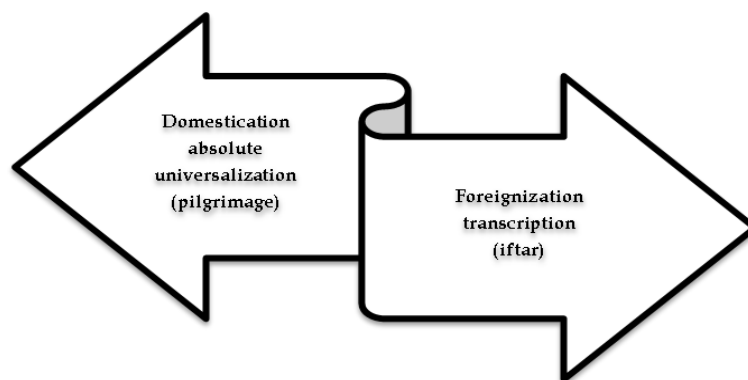


Figure N° 02: The movement from universalization to transcription

4.1 Qualitative discussion:

4.2.1 case 01:

The underlined expression in the table below is a very typical religious one. It is extracted from a verse of the Quran (*Al-Bakara, verse 156*). Its literal meaning in English is «*It is to God that we belong and it is to Him that we return*». Muslims utter this phrase in a very specific context: death notice. It plays a key role inside the discourse chain as it serves to ease the pain and express satisfaction with predestination and the choice made by Allah. It is exclusively used by Muslims, whether they are Arabs or not, to refer to the One and the Only creator of the Universe.

Table N°2: Case 1: Foreignization through universalization + domestication through repetition

| The source text | The target text |
|--|--|
| «اختتمت نشرة الأخبار بتكرار: «إنا لله وإنا إليه راجعون» ص. 12. | «He finished the news bulletin by repeating: <u>we are God's and to God will we return</u> ». p. 04. |

In spite of the declarative form of the expression, its real function is actually not to communicate new information (its content being supposed to be known and recognized by the interlocutor). Rather, it aims at creating a positive effect in the communicative sphere and to manage reactions. As to its translation, it was rendered literally, with an exception for the proper noun (Allah), for which the translator has chosen (God) used by Christians to refer to the creator of the Universe as well.

Through this act, the translator has applied two different strategies simultaneously: domestication (by repetition) and foreignization (by adaptation). In other terms, while the whole expression was repeated in its foreign grammatical and syntactic form, the word «الله» has been domesticated to convey the expressing habits of the reading audience (the target text readers) and to make the whole meaning of the original Islamic utterance localized.

Subsequently the translator's attention was seemingly focused on the functional role of the source expression rather than its cultural and religious value. This attitude leads us to admit that the Islamic identity was, in that very spot, blotted out and the translation Skopos was put forward and brought about a new hybrid form of the original expression.

4.2.2 Case 02:

The following narrative passage includes a very common image found almost in every Algerian home: a picture frame containing the most famous verse of the holy Quran called «آية الكرسي», pronounced /ajət əl kursi:/. The verse shows how nothing and nobody is regarded to be comparable to Allah.

Table N° 03: Case 2– Foreignization through omission + domestication through transcription

| The source text | The target text |
|---|--|
| «يرفع بصره إلى المصباح المتدلي أو إلى كادر كتبت عليه آية الكرسي بخط النسخ». ص. 29 | «He raised his eyes to the hanging lamp or to a frame with a <u>verse of the Qur'an</u> written on it in naskh». p. 21 |

This is one of the best-known verses of the Quran and is widely memorised and displayed in the Muslim world. Being of such symbolism, the author has intentionally specified the content of the frame, evoking the verse's name «آية الكرسي», rather than generalizing (by saying «آية قرآنية» which means 'a Quran verse', or «شيء من القرآن» to mean 'some of the Quran' for instance).

From a cultural point of view, this specification has its proper role in the discourse: it is intended to make the place where the scene took place more original and to help the reader to imagine it as such. To render this traditional and familiar image into the foreign context, the translator has chosen to domesticate it by the use of generalization as a technique. In other words, he applied a lexical modulation, which technically refers to going from the specific to the general. He merely presented the known and named content (آية الكرسي) as unknown and unnamed (a verse of the Quran). Taking the context in which it was applied, one can say that translation procedure has resulted in a mistranslation, since it missed to recreate the original image with all its socio-historical and cultural dimensions.

In a nutshell, and even if the translator's general demarche reveals a tendency to put the target reader in the first place, his behaviour is not always clear, as it is the case in the above-mentioned example. Explicitly and in the same segment, he avoids to cite the verse's name, and just after he proceeds to a domestication, by transcribing the Arab word «*naskh*», which refers to the Arabic writing type in which the verse's letters were written.

5. Conclusion

The quantitative and qualitative results of the present study confirm the hypothesis about the manifest influence of the new globalized writing and reading conditions in which a translation act is carried out. One can admit so far that every transfer process applied on a literary work ends up with a unique version.

In his new literary achievement, the translator of "Hatabu Sarajevo" was both visible and invisible at the same time. In order to get the Skopos of his translation act and resolve any transfer problem, he did not shy away from gathering different and even contradictory decision-making process strategies in the same passage, and the example of "*pilgrimage/iftar*" seems to be very illustrative of religious specific items' globalizing perspective.

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