

Cultural Untranslatability: Language and Culture in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*

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ABSTRACT:

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To investigate the limitations of using foreign language as a tool of expression and cultural representation in Arab Literature, Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* is examined from the standpoint of cultural and translation studies. Therefore, two major issues will be highlighted: the relationship between culture and linguistic representation, and the untranslatability of culture.

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I. Introduction

The objective of this research is to contest the assumption of translatability within the context of Anglophone Arab literature. Therefore, an investigation will be carried out to determine the efficiency of foreign languages (like English) in reflecting and projecting a local Arab culture. For this study, *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) by the Palestinian-American author Susan Abulhawa will be examined with regard to language choice and other related matters. There is a complex relationship between language and culture so none of them can exist without the other. This relationship will be given great importance in this research as it represents a major factor in challenging the concept of translatability.

Language is the means that Man created out of the need to communicate. It allows the transmission of ideas between individuals and communities, and even through time, from one generation to the other. Later, it became the medium that allows the exchange of various types of arts including, but not exclusively, literature. Accordingly, culture is the product of language, manifested in the form of arts, notably literature with its oral and written variations. Literature, in return, is the result of linguistic activity, and hence generated through language. The latter controls the creation, the quantity and the quality of the former. Thus, there are as many literatures in the world as many languages that exist. If a language prospers, its literature also prospers; and if a language dies, its literature will be destroyed and forgotten. On that account, language is a salient element which can participate in the growth of communities and nations or in their destruction. Consequently, one of the cruelest methods that were used by the French colonizer to destroy the indigenous identities of its colonies was removing their native languages by force and replacing them with French language. Because the colonizer cognizes the importance of a nation's language in maintaining its connectedness and preserving its culture and identity.

II. Language, Culture, and Meaning

It follows that language and culture are two entwined concepts which are studied in relation to one another. One could possibly claim that these two concepts cannot be examined separately. Culture, which encompasses the gist of a people's behaviors, practices, and experiences, is expressed, represented, and passed between generations via the means of language. A people's language and culture cannot, therefore, be handled individually as they complete and mutually serve one another. Stuart Hall, who dealt with these two concepts as components of one entity, believes that culture is a set of "shared meanings" within a certain society, and that language is the means to convey these meanings and make them

clear and understood owing to its commonality. In other words, a shared language among the members of society guarantees the good reception of the message (transferred via this language) and the understanding of the meanings that should be conveyed (Hall, 1997, p.1).

Furthermore, every community displays specific characteristics which distinguish it from other communities. This is what Stuart Hall labelled 'cultural difference'. Hence, according to this theory, meanings are determined through 'cultural contexts'. A certain object like a stone, Hall suggests, may carry various meanings and interpretations according to each community's cultural context. For Palestinians, a stone is a weapon which is used against Israeli soldiers. On the other hand, a stone in Igbo culture can act as a divine medium which links between the human world and the god's world. As in *Things Fall Apart*, this kind of stone has to be found and destroyed in order to avoid the child's death.

III. The Relationship between Language and Culture

As previously noted, language and culture are inseparable; each of them cannot stand alone without the other, given that language is a part of a particular culture and culture is only represented and manifested through a specific language. In light of that, the term "languaculture", which was suggested by Risager in 2007, demonstrates the mutual dependability between language and culture, and their intricate relationship.

Claire Kramsch (2014) believes that thinking and speaking are determined by one another. She also noted that a community is defined by two aspects which are language and culture. That is to say, both language and culture equally constitute a particular community and distinguish it from other communities. Culture, according to Kramsch, refers to "membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings." Hence, culture is not bound by a geographical space because the members of a certain culture unconsciously manifest their cultural aspects through communication wherever they located in the world (Kramsch, 2014, p. 404).

Communication, which is a common task of our daily lives, is a process that involves the use of language. According to Jakobson's model of communication through speech, this process requires the presence of six main constituents which are:

The Addresser (or sender, encoder or transmitter in other presentations) sends a Message to the Addressee (or receiver, decoder in other presentations). The Message is set in a particular Context. The Addresser and the Addressee must be at least

partially familiar with the Code. A final factor is represented by Contact, which is a physical channel and at the same time a psychological link between the Addresser and the Addressee making it possible to continue communication. (Panocová, 2020, p. 10-11)

This model of verbal communication involves a message that is transmitted from one individual to the other, by means of language (utterances which should be known and understood by the two individuals), and within a specific cultural context. Mutual knowledge of factors like language and cultural aspects are, apparently, of paramount importance to this model of communication.

Communication in this situation happens between members of the same cultural community, which guarantees the reception and understanding of the Message because the Code is clear, and understood by both the Addresser and the Addressee. In other words, individuals living in a common cultural setting are likely to achieve an effective communication process. In this case, the Contact is natural and spontaneous as the two parties are familiar with the remaining constituents of Jakobson's model.

In contrast, intercultural communication may take place when the Addresser and the Addressee come from two different cultural backgrounds. As a matter of fact, the interaction between individuals from different cultural settings exposes them to a set of behaviors and manners that cannot be interpreted based on or understood within the contexts of their respective cultural backgrounds. Drawing on that, intercultural communication requires mutual awareness and knowledge of the different cultural aspects of both the Addresser and the Addressee in order to achieve the purpose of communication. Cultural identity, therefore, must be highlighted as a major component in intercultural communication situations.

In his article "Negotiation of identities in Intercultural Communication", Zdeněk Janík (2017) mentions that social identity theory is responsible for categorizing people in groups based on their cultural and social membership. He further explains that in accordance with this theory, "people derive their identity from the social groups to which they belong". Indeed, there are multiple social groups depending on age, gender, profession and so on, while each individual can belong to more than one group. (Janík, 2017, p. 162)

In situations of intercultural communication, social identity is less relevant than its counterpart cultural identity. The latter draws attention to the individual's belonging to a certain cultural group (rather than a social group). He, thus, points out that cultural identity is determined by identifying with a certain cultural group

based on a set of characteristics like: language, race, skin-color, and overall appearance and behaviors. (Janík, 2017, p. 164)

Therefore, when we speak of cultural identity in relation to intercultural communication, certain measurements should be taken to avoid miscommunication. Adaptation, for instance, of the Addresser's behaviors, manners, way of thinking and speech, etc to the Addressee's cultural norms is by far of great importance to facilitate understanding the conveyed Message and consequently maintain the communication.

IV. Translation Vs. Cultural Translation

Generally speaking, Venuti defines the concept of 'translation' as the process of changing a foreign text, in terms of language and culture, into the target language while maintaining its intelligibility. Consequently, throughout this process, a certain inevitable difference between the original text and the target one occurs. This difference, as a corollary, is "imprinted by the target-language culture, assimilated to its positions of intelligibility, its canons and taboos, its codes and ideologies" (Venuti, 1995, p. 18). In terms of translating one's cultural elements into a foreign language, foreign readers are exposed to an unfaithful image. Despite its difference from western culture, the latter is rendered similar to it because of the language used to depict it. Thus, the author's choice of language creates a dilemma when the producer of the message (the author) and the receiver are from two different cultural backgrounds. In this case, words which are rooted in the author's culture cannot be fully comprehended by the foreign reader without providing extra explanation. In order to achieve accuracy in translation, it is important that the original text is communicated, within the target language culture, with acute precision so that the same effect is conveyed. Hence, Nida points out that "the receptors of a translation should comprehend the translated text to such an extent that they can understand how the original receptors must have understood the original text." (Qtd. in Venuti, 1995, p. 22)

The purpose of translation, as Venuti points out "is to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, (and) even the familiar" (Venuti, 1995, p. 18). However, Schleiermacher concludes that "translation can never be completely adequate to the foreign text" (Venuti, 1995, p. 20). Accordingly, the untranslatability of some cultural elements, which creates an obstacle in the translation of literary works from the source language to the target language, is an ever-incurable deficiency that can be covered (but not healed) by using equivalent statements or phrases (that is, manipulating or omitting) instead of rendering the full meaning. In translation studies, this phenomenon is known as "adaptation".

Dr. Assaqaf “define[s] adaptation as a type of translation which involves a number of changes,” amongst which he mentions: “deletion, addition, explanation, illustration, and exemplification” (Assaqaf, 2013, p. 783). Therefore, through adaptation, the translator (or in this case, the author) is compelled to modify certain details or meanings due to cultural or social constraints. Hence, some words or expressions in the source text must undergo changes so that they become familiar to the target audience. In fact, some important elements are either altered, underrepresented, or lost during the process of adaptation. Consequently, cultural exchange is hindered or limited due to the target language’s inability of conveying the culture of the source text.

In light of what has been said, it is necessary to foreground the concept of cultural translation which implies the existence of different cultures and their impact on the process of translation. Accordingly, the task of the translator is to transfer meaning from the source language to the target language while taking into consideration the cultural background of the original author and that of the prospective target audience. Hence, cross-cultural skills are highly needed to convey meaning while maintaining the cultural aspects of the source text.

In dealing with literary translation, Samar Zahrawi (2018) points out the difficulties that a translator encounters due to the existence of “culture specific items”, which are also referred to as “culturemes”. The latter indicates the words, phrases, and expressions which are associated with the culture of the source text, and with which the foreign reader is unfamiliar (Zahrawi, 2018, p. 4). It is, therefore, necessary to point out the concept of “multiculturalism” which assumes that each culture has its unique and original features distinguishing it from other cultures. Accordingly, the “world is a sort of cluster of different cultural identities either tolerantly recognizing or violently excluding each other.” (Buden et al., 2009, p. 198) In this context, the task of cultural translation is to reconcile different cultures by simplifying or removing the differences between them. Quite the opposite, however, some scholars oppose the idea of untranslatability, assuming that translation is always possible in all cases, and suggesting different strategies that help in the translation of culturemes and culture specific items, such as, paraphrasing, omitting, and substituting, etc (Coman and Selejan, 2017, p. 304).

Among cultural translation concerns is translating words or expressions that are specific to one culture and have no equivalent in the target culture. Thus, this research focuses on two main translation approaches which are “foreignising” and “domesticating”. While the former indicates the direct use of foreign elements

(words, phrases, or expressions) within the target text and exposing the readers to the source text's cultural aspects, the latter explains and simplifies these elements in a way that the readers can easily relate them to familiar elements of the target culture.

V. Literature and Cultural Representation: A Linguistic Conflict or Unity?

Literature is the linguistic manifestation which reflects and demonstrates a certain society's peculiar culture and cultural practices. Attempts to define literature are futile since its scope is very vast. Formerly, the term literature was used to denote any written work that possesses aesthetic qualities. Later on, it has come to indicate all imaginative and creative works. Since literature is a social product that bears a particular society's cultural aspects, it is natural for a literature – which belongs to a certain community – to be produced in that community's native language. Consequently, literature defines and distinguishes this particular culture from other cultures. However, numerous Arab writers tend to produce a literature written in a foreign language, notably in English.

According to Wail S. Hassan, it has not been long since the history of the Arab American novel emerged. Ameen Rihani, whose first Arab American novel *The Book of Khalid* (1911) was a major literary work of that era, was one of the pioneers of this trend. Furthermore, during the Arab Nahda (renaissance) and thanks to migration and education missions abroad, Arab scholars managed to combine their native culture with their newly acquired cultures in a sort of “selective appropriation”, while rejecting the European norms that challenged and “did not harmonize with Arab Islamic mores and values” (Hassan, 2013, p. 39 - 40). One can conclude that expatriate Arab scholars or writers connected two or more cultures, while others even “tried to fuse them together” (Hassan, 2013, p. 41) and thus created a literature that would appeal for a wide variety of audiences.

In this respect, the Arab scholar or writer plays the role of a translator while trying to bridge and stitch the distance between two different cultures and literary traditions. Hence, Edward Said states that

The relation between Orientalist and Orient was essentially hermeneutical: standing before a distant, barely intelligible civilization or cultural monument, the Orientalist scholar reduced the obscurity by translating, sympathetically portraying, inwardly grasping the hard-to-reach object. (Qtd in Hassan, 2013, p. 43)

The Anglo-Arab text is, therefore, similar to a translated text from Arabic to English while keeping some properties specific to the Arabic language and Arab

culture in general. By doing so, the Arab writer creates a challenging text that is partially understood by her/his foreign readers. This has the effect of estranging the English language by confronting its native speakers with linguistic difference within a deliberately hybridized discourse, instead of leaving them in a comfort zone that does not challenge their assumptions and expectations. (Hassan, 2013, p. 48)

Mornings in Jenin (2010) by the Palestinian-American writer Susan Abulhawa is a novel written in English. It is a fictional work based on historical facts and real events. It deals with the Palestinian history since the days when Palestine was still a peaceful country inhabited by Arab *fellaheen* (the Arabic word for ‘peasants’), until the year of 2002, passing by all the crises and wars which Palestine (and Palestinians) went through. Although she is Palestinian by birth, Abulhawa moved to and settled in the United States when she was a teenager.

In her novel, Abulhawa has selected a set of chapter titles and subtitles which were both in Arabic and English languages, reflecting her dual linguistic and cultural belonging. Although the novel as a whole is composed in English language, the writer believed in the importance of inserting some Arabic words (culture specific items) which better represented or expressed the cultural and social settings of her work. As far as the chapter titles are concerned, she preferred using, for instance, the Arabic words *EL NAKSA*, *EL NAKBA*, (both words are associated with Palestinian history) and *EL GHURBA* instead of their English equivalent, which might not be as relevant or even as expressive as Arabic words are in this context.

El Nakba and El Naksa on May 15th, 1948 and June 06th, 1967 respectively, symbolize two crucial events in the Palestinian history, since they marked the dismantling of Palestinian society through mass displacement, as thousands of Palestinians were driven away from their homeland by the Israeli occupation. The lexical meaning of these two words, and consequently their literal translation into English, will only diminish their real historical value and omits the cultural significance these two words hold.

As a writer and a humanitarian who possessed a particular goal or cause, she aimed –through her book – at exposing and spreading the truth about Israel’s crimes in Palestine on a large scale. There also exists a sort of presentation or exhibition, so to speak, of her Arabic and Palestinian roots and identity via a global medium which is the English language. As can be seen, through

representing the Arab/ Palestinian society via a foreign language, Abulhawa becomes both the author and the translator of her own book.

On this ground, the use of Arabic in her novel rendered the characters more lively and independent. As the use of colloquial words like *Jiddo* and *thobe* made them seem natural and closer to reality. Moreover, her characters seem to express themselves and their own identities freely. Hence, employing the Arabic language in her text highlighted the discourse of resistance. Even the language itself is a language of resistance since it resists the solid anglophony – so to speak – of the text, penetrates it, and then blends with it harmoniously.

Mornings in Jenin is a Palestinian novel that represents and recreates the Palestinian social and cultural aspects and exposes them to a foreign audience, who is unfamiliar with those cultural items employed by the author. Hence, the use of a glossary becomes an indispensable part of the novel that offers non-Arab readers an overview of the culturemes they encounter while reading the novel. The glossary, therefore, serves as a miniature dictionary – specific to a certain topic – that helps familiarize the foreign reader with all the unfamiliar cultural items.

Throughout the novel, the readers come across a set of Arabic words and expressions which the author explained in the glossary she provided at the end of her book. Some expressions like: *dabke*, which refers to a traditional form of dancing particular to the countries of the Middle East (Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria), reflect the artistic aspect of the region's culture. Cuisine is also a cultural aspect which is represented by words like *kaak*. The latter is also known as *kaak al-Quds* which is a type of traditional bread made specifically by Palestinians. Words like *kaffiyeh* and *thobe*, which are types of traditional clothes worn by people of the Middle East, signify fashion. Religious culture is also reflected through expressions like *inshalla*, *bismillah arrahman arraheem*. These items and many others are purely cultural and they are directly linked to the Palestinian and Arab identity. The translation of these words in the glossary shows the equivalent in English, but the real meaning cannot be completely understood by the readers who are not familiar with Arabic or Palestinian culture.

In view of that, Abulhawa, who has failed – to some extent – to provide the accurate and exact English equivalent of Arabic words such as *dabke* or *kaffiyeh* implanted them within her novel, and devoted a whole section to explain them afterwards. The word *dishdash*, for instance, is explained as a “traditional long robe, worn by both men and women” (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 330). It is, as the other Arabic items mentioned in the text, one of the symbols of Palestinian identity.

This, in fact, denotes the author's efforts to 'domesticate' her native culture, and render it familiar to the global reader. As an attempt to establish a link between the novel's Palestinian background and the cultures of her audience, she oversimplifies the term *fatayer*, for instance, into "a type of baked bread," and due to the latter's inability to contain or convey the whole meaning of the word, she further explains through mentioning some of the ingredients used in the making of this popular Palestinian dish (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 330).

The term "glossary" is derived from the word gloss, which according to the Dictionary of Word Roots and Combining Forms, is a Greek word that literally means "tongue" (Borror, 1988, p. 43). Indeed, the glossary in *Mornings in Jenin* plays the role of a tongue that explains and simplifies the text. Figuratively speaking, it signifies the author's mother tongue that has an informative function, allowing the foreign reader to experience and immerse into a new and unfamiliar culture. Similarly, Jill Farrar, who studied the usage of glossary in fiction, argues that the presence of the glossary in fiction creates "a parallel text to the novel in which the voice of the author 'speaks', and in doing so had much to say, by its multi-vocal presence, (...) about the ways in which writing is both knowledge and being, knowing and making" (Farrar, 2008, p. 4-5) as well as sharing knowledge.

In other words, the English language is not a faithful mirror for the Palestinian to see the reflection of his/ her own nation's cultural identity. Therefore, if the English language alone was sufficient to communicate Abulhawa's message, she would have never employed Arabic words within her work. Language is the channel through which we communicate our cultures, ideas, identities, and reflect our individual and communal selves. Hence, language and cultural representation cannot be separated. In her article "Blurring the Line between Language and Culture"; Fatiha Guessabi (2011) argues that "we could not understand a culture without having direct access to its language because of their intimate connection."

Even within her novel, Abulhawa tends to expose and reveal the inadequacy of the English language at mirroring her (and her protagonist's) Palestinian cultural background. The following quote from *Mornings in Jenin* shows that a simple "thank you" in English is a measly reward – so to speak – which is not sufficient to express Amal's gratitude towards her host's kindness. In the community where she was born and raised, various expressions are used according to the situation or the occasion. After she thanks her host, she annotates: "[i]n the Arab world, gratitude is a language unto itself." (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 169) Later on, she adds: "[c]oming from such a culture, I have always found a

mere 'thank you' an insufficient expression that makes my voice miserly and ungrateful." (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 170)

Amal's first interaction with foreign culture and language was on the day she arrived to America. The first thing that she noticed was the huge difference between her mother tongue and English language in terms of expressing different feelings like gratitude. Uncertainty about what to say and how to react in a foreign language like English is juxtaposed with her satisfaction with and pride of the Arabic expressions that could have been more than useful were she able to use them in this context.

Conclusion

In light of what has been said above, cultural representation through literature would better be articulated in its own native language due to the impossibility of conveying it fully and faithfully in a foreign language. However, in view of the proliferation of globalization in the contemporary era and the important role that the English language plays as an international medium which links all nations and peoples, the likelihood of producing an Arab literature purely composed in English is also a valid hypothesis. Authors who are aiming for worldwide recognition and for having a global audience, thirsty for learning about exotic cultures through fiction, would most likely opt for a universal language (such as English) to facilitate the spread of their writings all over the world. In this case, the unification of both native and foreign languages and the domestication of native cultural elements would intensify the exoticism of such works and render them more attention-grabbing.

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