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## *Modern Arabic poetry translation:*

# **An analytical Study in Translating Taha's poem "A Rustic Song"**

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### **Abstract**

To render poetry from one language to another, several poetic elements are going to be lost. Poetry, as Robert Frost says, is what lost in translation. Besides the lost of meter as well as the communicative value of the original poem, the aesthetic elements cannot be retained in translation. Literal rendering when adopted in most cases obliterates the sense and aesthetics of the original. The task becomes more complicated especially when the two languages are belonging to dissimilar families as in the case with Arabic and English. This study is concerned with one of the beautiful Modern Arabic poems translated into English.

**Keywords:** Translation; Poetry; Rhyme; Metre; Equivalence; Dynamic; Communicative value.

### **1. Introduction**

The following poem is composed by Ali Mahmud Taha (1902-1949), a leading Egyptian romantic of the 1930s and 1940s [7]. As a lyrical poet, some of his poems were put to music and attained great popularity [8].

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He was conversant with the English language which put him in good place to translate the works of some English writers such as John Masefield and Shelley. Despite his limited knowledge of French, he translated Lamartine and Verlaine [7].

The following poem, "A rustic song" "أغنية ريفية", by Ali Mahmud Taha is translated by Mounah A. Khouri and Hamid Algar [6]. It appeared in the poet's collection "The Lost Mariner" "الملاح التائه" in 1934 [1]. The original is a metric and rhymed lyrical poem, written in simple Arabic; however, it overflows with beautiful romantic imagery making its translation into English very difficult as we shall see. In translating this poem Mounah A. Khouri and Hamid Algar follow the literal translation method.

#### أغنية ريفية

1. اذا داعب الماء ظل الشجر وغازلت السحب ضوء القمر
2. ورددت الطير أنفاسها خوفاً بين الندى والزهر
3. وناحت مطوقة بالهوى تناجي الهديل وتشكو القدر
4. وممر على النهر ثغر النسيم يقبل كل شرع عبر
5. وأطلعت الأرض من ليلها مفاتن مختلفات الصور

#### A rustic song

1. When the water caresses the shade of the tree,

And the clouds court the light of the moon;

2. And the birds send forth their songs

To re-echo between dew and blossom;

3. And the ringdove laments her passion,

Cooing to her love and bemoaning her fate;

4. And the lips of the breeze pass over the Nile,

Kissing every passing sail;

5. And the earth brings forth from the night

Beauties of manifold shape;

To begin with, one might start from the title of the poem which has not been given a successful translation. The word "rustic" does not reflect exactly the denotative meaning of the Arabic word "ريف". Translators while translating poetry should pay more attention to different dimensions of meaning accompanying the use of the

source language original word, one of which is its suggestive meaning, as most theorists claim. The translators exclude "rural" which would be able to convey the precise sense of the Arabic word used here as a title for this poem. Yet, both words "rustic" and "rural" are synonyms in English, each of them has its own designated meaning that makes it different from its counterpart. What the word "rural" suggests differs from what "rustic" implies. The Arabic word under discussion denotes an area where people live on their own farms, cultivating the soil and breeding animals. It also indicates a beautiful life far from the complicated life of cities. The English word "rural" carries precisely the same denotative and connotative meanings of the Arabic word under discussion. Therefore, we can say that the communicative value of the title of the poem is not successfully achieved. In translation, as all theorists agree, the communicative value is the most important element that should be striven for; otherwise, the translated material will have no value. On the other hand, the English word "rustic" does not indicate exactly as its synonym "rural" the characteristic and life of the countryside. "Rustic" suggests the meaning of having a simplicity and charm that is considered typical of the countryside (Collins) [3].

In translating the first line of this poem, the translators manage to give a correct rendition of the first hemistich; however, on the morphological level, the Arabic word "الشجر" is rendered in the singular whereas it is used in the plural in the original line. There is no justification for that since the meaning would be more accurate if the plural rather than the singular were used. As the scene depicts the flow of the water of the Nile among the trees, the beauty would be better described as water caresses the shades of several trees rather than one tree as the translators opt for. In translation, the significant element of the plural used in the original is not preserved.

In translating the second line, the translators succeed in their task, for instance, the Arabic word "ردد" is correctly rendered. The translators' use of the English word "send forth" does reflect accurately the sense of the Arabic word under discussion. However, the translators' choice "re-echo" in rendering the Arabic word "خوافق" is not proper. The Arabic word "خوافق", as used by Taha, carries the meaning of moving from one place to another; flying between dew and blossoms (al-Hadi ila al-Lughati al-Arabiyyh: Qamus Arabic-Arabic). [5] The two translators transfer the movement of the birds to the movement of sound through "re-echo" which completely changes the communicative value of the Arabic word under discussion. In translating the Arabic word "أنفاس", the translators' selection is not proper. This Arabic word has the sense of "breathe" rather than "songs" as the translators opt for. Another problem, here, in translating this line is the change of the morphological signs which affect the meaning of the translated material as happened with the Arabic word "الزهر" which is used mainly in the plural. Such shifts, done by most literal translators of poetry, as Lefevre [6] points out and as mentioned above, lead them to disregard the communicative value of a certain word in the original poem. Moreover, this practice, as Lefevre concludes, narrows down the meaning of the word in the target text.

The third line in the original poem has been given a proper translation. In the fourth line of the original, the "lips of the breeze" gently passing over the river Nile gives a sense of quick passage, expressing the beauty within solitude. In translation, the beautiful image, previously explained, is successfully rendered. The Arabic word "ثغر", which is correctly translated into "lips", is used to indicate "the mouth". In translation, the translators deviate from literalness as they are aware of the proper use of the English word "lips" in the English culture

instead of "mouth". In this way, we can say that this translation preserves the communicative value of the translated line effectively. Likewise, the fifth line, though literally, has been given a very good translation in terms of economy and correctness.

6. هنالك صفصافة في الدجى كأن الظلام بها ما شعر  
7. أخذت مكاني في ظلها شريد الفؤاد كئيب النظر  
8. أمر بعيني خلال السماء واطرق مستغرقا في الفكر  
9. أطلع وجهك تحت النخيل وأسمع صوتك تحت النهر  
10. إلى أن يمل الدجى وحشتي وتشكو الكآبة مني الضجر  
11. وتعجب من حيرتي الكائنات وتشفق مني نجوم السحر  
12. فأمضي لأرجع مستشرفا لقاءك في الموعد المنتظر

6. And when a willow stands in the darkness,

Hidden as if unknown to night,

7. There in its shade I take my place,

With heart distraught and sadness gaze,

8. I let my eyes wander through the skies,

My head downcast and sunk in thought.

9. Then I see your face beneath the palm tree,

And by the river I hear your voice,

10. Until darkness is tired of my loneliness,

And sadness complains of boredom;

11. Until creation wonders at my bewilderment,

And the Morningstar takes pity on me;

12. And I go on my way, to search again in hope

For our encounter at the long-awaited hour.

The poet goes on, in line six, to describe another scene where a "willow" tree, often found on the banks of the Nile with its branches bending towards the river, is a symbol of meditation, longing, and solitude. In this line it is attached to images of love and pleasure to make a contrast. Despite a largely successful translation the Arabic adverb of place "هناك", used in the first hemistich, is not correctly expressed. This Arabic adverb can be easily rendered into "over there" and its omission in translation gives a different nuance to the meaning depicted in the original poem which goes from one vivid image to another. In the original line, Taha says that a willow over there stands in the darkness. However, the translators' rendition of the second hemistich is very plausible as they are deviating from literality.

While the translators produce a correct translation of line seven, the second hemistich of line eight is not rendered accurately. Their choice of "sunk in thought" for the Arabic word "مستغرقا في الفكر" is not correct; it would be better rendered as "engrossed in thought" which gives precisely the exact meaning of the Arabic word "مستغرق". The difference in meaning between "sunk" and "engrossed" is easily distinguishable. Although the English word "sunk" is the literal translation of the Arabic "غرق" which is the root of "مستغرق", however, the English expression "engrossed in thought" is the accurate equivalent to the Arabic word under discussion. In English "engrossed in thought" carries the sense of having all one's attention or interest absorbed by someone or something; exactly the same meaning used by the Arab poet. In this line the poet is addressing his beloved, describing the beautiful harmony in nature and his internal feeling of isolation. However, he is not sad or pessimistic; the face of his beloved is drawn on the face of nature which can be seen in line nine of the poem. In the translation of this line, although it is correctly rendered, the Arabic word "النخيل", should not be translated into the singular as it is used in the plural. The use of the plural in the original image makes the sight more beautiful and bright, as the face of the poet's beloved could be seen under all the palm trees.

In translating the tenth line, the Arabic word "الكآبة" is rendered into "sadness"; however, such an English word does not indicate precisely the meaning of the Arabic word under discussion. This word "الكآبة" in Arabic carries the sense of a feeling of depression or deep unhappiness. Moreover, "الكآبة" in Arabic indicates someone whose heart is broken as a result of a great sadness (al-Hadi ila al-Lughati al-Arabiyah: Qamus Arabic-Arabic). [5] Although words such as "sadness" and "despondence" are synonyms, each one of them has its own distinctive meaning. Therefore, the English word "despondence" which has the meaning of a state of low spirits caused by loss of hope or courage would be the most appropriate one to convey such meaning. In the last two lines of the poem, the translators give an accurate literal translation. For instance, the English word "creation" that has a collective meaning, is successfully used to convey the meaning of the Arabic word "الكائنات". Both words whether in English or in Arabic denote all kinds of creatures; people, trees.

In this poem then, one can notice the embellishments employed to the uttermost to give the poem a beautiful suggestive atmosphere, an atmosphere which cannot, in any way, easily be interpreted by another language. The decorative style might be conveyed but not the poetic power accompanying it. This translation is successful in that it conveys the aesthetic value of the original, giving English readers the opportunity for responding to the passion and love and regret and sympathy felt by Arab readers of the original. However, in the original line-

length metaphors convey the mysterious beauty of rural Egypt, with its provocative depth emphasized by beautiful scenes of moonlit nights intensified by mirrors of sky, moon, and water. Another crucial aspect of such metaphors, which are definitely lost in translation and indeed no translation could really capture, is the full cultural connotation of the palm-trees used several times in the lines under discussion. In Arabic culture, the word for palm trees "النخيل", used in line nine, has extensive connotations essential to the very sense of Arab identity. Likewise, the word "القمر", used in line one, carries many connotations for an Arab man, as it is used to describe the beauty of a beloved and good companion. Metaphors, metre, and rhythm employed by the original poet represent the defining limits of any serious translation primarily because they express certain elements of Arab culture alien to English readers.

## **2. Conclusion**

In this poem, then, metre and rhythm are clear casualties, and the metaphor has lost not only its musical context, but also, because of the use of the literal translation method, its cultural connotations. Literal translation does not make a poem. Some of the music or magic, the spirit of the original, may be retained, but its full, rich material rarely survives undamaged. As a strategy, literal translation, as Lefevere says [2], is intended for those particular groups of readers who would like to know what exactly the original poem says, and by comparing the original with the translation, learn the foreign language, or carry out academic research. Usually this kind of translation, as he explains, does not read smoothly and sometimes presents bad grammar and poor collocations, or poses difficulty in understanding. Therefore, one can conclude that the rhymed translation approach suggested by Lefevere [2], if it is used in translating the poem discussed in this study, in contrast to the literal translation method, might work better, preserving as it does, at least some of the special elements used in the originals. This applies especially to the translations of some Modern Arabic poems, such as the one currently under discussion, which is written basically in metre and rhyme.

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