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## Translation Studies: An Analytical Study of the Translation of Nuaymah's Poem "The Frozen River"

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### Abstract

To translate from one language to another is to find a sort of compromise in conveying meaning as faithful as possible from one language to another as many scholars point out. However, the task of translation becomes very difficult when the issue is concerned with literary texts translation. The challenge of language, the writer's intention, the time in which the text is written in as well as the type of text play crucial responsibilities in the production of a correct version of the original text. On the other hand, when the issue is related to poetry translation, another essential factor makes such a task more complicated. The translator of poetry has to deal and preserve not only content but the form as well which are all together responsible on the production of the whole picture of any poem.

To render poetry from one language to another, several poetic elements are going to be lost. 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 as well as aesthetic elements 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 article is concerned with one of the beautiful Modern Arabic poems translated into English in a literal way.

**Key words:** translation; communicative value; literal, metre; rhyme; collocation.

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## 1. Introduction

The following poem, “The Frozen River” “النهر المتجمد”, is composed by the Lebanese poet Mikhail Nuaymah (1889-1989), one of the Arab romantic poets who emigrated to the United States [11]. “The Frozen River” was written by Nuaymah in 1917 and published in 1971, together with others, in a volume titled “همس الجفون” (Eyelid Whisperings) in 1943 [11]. He was, with Jibran and some other Syro-American writers, behind the foundation of what is known as “The Pen Association), the first modernizing school of Arabic literature. As a writer, he is known in the field of literary criticism by his book “The Sieve” “الغربال” which appeared in 1923 [11]. Nuaymah, as a writer, poet and critic, is considered as one of the most distinguished figures in Arabic literature. This poem was firstly written by Nuaymah in Russian then was later rendered into Arabic as described by Nadeem Naimy [10]. “The Frozen River”, as Badawi points out, is considered to be one of Nuaymah’s best-known nature poems [11]. His poetry is distinguished by simplicity of language and the use of colloquialisms which have been ascribed to the influence of Lebanese folk songs, his use of prose rhythms and his preference for short stanzas [10]. However, Badawi attributes that to his peaceful spiritual life. The poem uses one metrical pattern but a varying rhyming scheme. “The Frozen River” “النهر المتجمد” of Nuaymah is translated literally into English by M.A. Khouri [10].

1. يا نهر هل نضبت مياهك فانقطعت عن الخريف
2. أم قد هرمت وخار عزمك فانثنت عن المسير
3. بالأمس كنت مرنا بين الحدائق والزهور
4. تتلو على الدنيا وما فيها أحاديث الدهور
5. بالأمس كنت تسير لا تخشى الموانع في الطريق
6. واليوم قد هيبت عليك سكينه اللحد العميق
7. بالأمس كنت إذا أتيتك باكيا سليتني
8. واليوم صرت إذا أتيتك ضاحكا أبكيتني
9. بالأمس كنت إذا سمعت تنهدي وتوجعي
10. تبكي، وها ابكي أنا وحدي، ولا تبكي معي
11. ما هذه الأكفان؟ أم هذى قيود من جليد
12. قد كبلتك وذللتك بها يد البرد الشديد

1. O river! Have your waters run so dry that I no longer hear your murmuring?
2. Or have you grown old? Has your will grown weak? Have you ceased your flowing?
3. Yesterday you used to sing among the fields and flowers;
4. You recited to the world and all therein the tales of the ages.
5. Yesterday you flowed along fearing no obstacles on your way

6. While today, the silence of deep grave has fallen over you.
7. Yesterday when I came to you weeping, you cheered my spirits;
8. Whereas today, when I came to you laughing, you led me to weep.
9. Yesterday when you heard my sighing and lamenting, you wept,
10. Whereas here am I, weeping along, but you do not join in my tears.
11. What are these shrouds? Or are they bonds of ice
12. With which the harsh hand of the cold has chained and humbled you?

Through this literal translation, Khouri tries to convey exactly the essence of this poem. In this study, one is going to investigate further different areas of success and failure in his rendition of Nuaymah's poem. In translating the first line, the translator manages to give a successful rendition. Khouri does not translate the Arabic verbs "نضب" and "انقطع" literally. The shift in translation by the translator, preserves the communicative value of the line under discussion. The poet literally says, addressing the river, "O river, have your waters run out, and therefore you ceased murmuring?" Such literal rendition is excluded by Khouri since it is not expressive in English and will not have the same nuance as used in the original line. The Arabic verbs "نضب", which means in English "ran out or dried up", and "انقطع" meaning "ceased or stopped", imply almost the same meaning where something is finished or stopped. However, despite the similar meaning of both Arabic words, they differ from each other in terms of expressivity. Moreover, as most theorists claim, what might be expressive in one language may not be expressive in another through translation. In translating the Arabic words mentioned above, as soon as the translator realises the dilemma of using the literal translation method in distorting the meaning of the first line of the original poem, he resorts successfully to the communicative translation where emphasis is put the reproduction of effect [13]. Within the parameters of this method, the translator has the right to clarify meaning and eliminate repetition. Importance should be determined by the message conveyed and not by its form as happens here in Khouri's rendition. This is also what Nida calls "the dynamic equivalence" where the selection of an appropriate target language equivalent to the source text material should be striven for in order to reproduce an equivalent effect on the target language receiver as that experienced by the source language receiver [4].

In the second line, Khouri manages to produce a proper rendition when he follows the same strategy used in translating the first line. However, the expressivity of the Arabic phrase "انثنت عن المسير" is not produced in Khouri's translation. This would be attributable to the difference between both languages in the level of the semantic field. On the semantic level, the Arabic verbal phrase "انثنى عن" indicates the meaning of "to retreat,

recoil from, shrink back etc”. Yet, Khouri’s rendition reflects, somehow, the same meaning used in the original, the Arabic verbal phrase “انثنى عن” is still metaphorically charged with several other dimensions of meaning such as the suggestive and the connotative. On the other hand, the conjunction “ف”, as a particle in the Arabic phrase “فانثنيت عن المسير”, denotes the result of a condition expressed in the previous phrase, “هرمت وخار عزمك”, which is not indicated in Khouri’s translation. We can agree with Smith and Frawley that the use of conjunctions offers an insight into the whole logic of discourse [8]. Therefore, since the Arabic conjunction “ف” is a part of the semantic discourse, it should be reproduced in translation precisely. However, this does not mean that the target language version should, as most theorists maintain, obey the rules of the source language norms of cohesion.

In translating the rest of this group of lines, Khouri manages to give commendable renditions in terms of economy and correctness. However, the Arabic verb “هبط”, used metaphorically in the sixth line, is not precisely rendered. The exact meaning of this verb is “to come down from above” which will be best indicated by the English verb “descended”. However, no two words that carry exactly the same meaning would survive in one language since each word has its own different meaning which is totally different in some aspects from its own corresponding item in all languages. This supports the argument concerning the accurate use of the English verb “descended” rather than “fall over” that Khouri opts for.

On the other hand, the beautiful image portrayed in the tenth line is not successfully re-produced. The poet in the original line literally says, addressing the river, “... I am weeping alone and you do not weep with me”. The repetition of the verb “weep” in the original line as well as the metre employed and the internal rhythm, make the image more vivid and effective and give the poem what is known in the language of poetry as “overtones”. Such repetition is not successfully reflected in Khouri’s translation. However, there is an association of ideas in the original line which is wonderfully conveyed in Khouri’s rendition in terms of his use of the words “weep” and “tears”. In translating the eleventh and the twelfth lines of this poem, the translator manages to give a correct rendition in spite of his literal method. However, the Arabic word “الشديد” is an adjective used to describe the word “cold” but not the word “hand” as Khouri interprets it. The more suitable rendition of the Arabic phrase “يد البرد الشديد” would be “the hand of severe cold” in contrast to Khouri’s choice. Although both words “severe” and “harsh” are synonyms in English, the English word “severe” would be the more suitable translation in this context as it is always used to describe the state of weather in English.

14. يجثو كنيبا كلما مرت به ريح الشمال
15. والهور يندب فوق رأسك ناثرا أغصانه
16. لا يسرح الحسون فيه مرددا ألحانه
17. تأتيه أسراب من الغربان تنعق في الفضا
18. فكأنها ترثي شبابا من حياتك قد مضى
19. وكأنها بنعيها عند الصباح وفي المساء
20. جوق يشيع جسمك الصافي إلى دار البقاء

13. Here the willows, beside you, with neither leaves nor beauty

14. Kneel in grief every time the North Wind passes through them.

15. And poplar spreading its branches mourns above your head;

16. The goldfinches do not range there repeating their melodies.

17. Flocks of crows came cawing through the vast expanse,

18. As though they were lamenting your life's youth which has passed.

19. With their croaking at morn and at eve, as though

20. They were choir escorting your pure body to the next world.

In translating the thirteenth and fourteenth lines of this poem, Khouri renders them correctly. For instance, Khouri's translation of the Arabic word "ناثرا" into "spreading" is a better choice since the meaning of both words, either in English or in Arabic, indicates the sense of throwing something away in various directions. However, the Arabic word "ناثرا" is not a proper word chosen by the Arab poet to describe the branches of the poplar which are spread over the head of willow. The accurate word in Arabic for describing such scene is "ناشرا".

In translating the succeeding lines in this section, Khouri manages to convey a plausible literal rendition. However, the shift, in the sixteenth line, on the morphological level, where the translator uses the plural instead of the singular, does not affect the meaning or the communicative value of the source language material. On the other hand, the Arabic word "ترثي", used in the eighteenth line, is successfully rendered as "lamenting" rather than "eulogising". Although, both words "ترثي" in Arabic and "eulogise" in English have a reciprocal meaning in one way or another, the English word "eulogising" is excluded by Khouri because of its limited meaning. Conversely, the English word "lament" has the meaning of expressing sorrow and sadness over someone or something that has passed. One can say that the meaning of the English word "eulogise" is included in the word

“lament” whereas the reverse is not true. On the other hand, the formal equivalence is excluded in rendering the Arabic phrase “دار البقاء” which refers to the next world after death. In Arabic, the word “دار” may collocate with the Arabic word “البقاء” in contrast to English where the two words “abode” and “eternal” do not collocate with each other. The translator’s awareness of such problems, leads him successfully to employ a proper equivalence, “the next world”, that indicates the same meaning used in the original line.

21. لكن سينصرف الشتاء وتعود أيام الربيع
22. فتفك جسمك من عقال مكنته يد الصقيع
23. وتكر موجتك النقية حرة نحو البحار
24. حبلى بأسرار الدجى ، ثملى بأنوار النهار
25. وتعود تبسم إذ يلاطف وجهك الصافي النسيم
26. وتعود تسبح في مياهك أنجم الليل البهيم
27. والبدر يبسط من سماه عليك سرا من لجين
28. والشمس تستر بالأزاهر منكبيك العاربيين
29. والخور ينسى ما اعتراه من المصائب والمحن
30. ويعود يشمخ أنفه ويميس مخضر الفنن
31. وتعود للصفصاف بعد الشيب أيام الشباب
32. فيغرد الحسون فوق غصونه بدل الغراب

21. The winter however will depart and the days of spring return,
22. To unbind the bonds which the hand of the frost has fastened,
23. And your clear wave will return again and freely charge down towards the seas
24. Pregnant with the secrets of darkness, drunken with the lights of day.
25. You will return smiling for the breeze will fondly caress your serene face.
26. You will return again with the stars of thick black night swimming in your waters.
27. And the moon from her sky will spread over you a veil of silver
28. And the sun with her flowers will hide your bare shoulders.
29. And the poplar will forget what calamities and trials have afflicted her
30. And hold high her head, swinging to and fro proudly and her boughs will turn green.
31. And the days of youth will return to the willow after old age
32. And the goldfinch will warble sweetly above her branches, instead of the crow.

In these lines Nuaymah depicts very beautiful images and Khouri manages to give commendable translations despite his literal approach. Nonetheless, Khouri, in order to preserve the communicative value of the lines under discussion, deviates successfully from his literal translation method when translating the Arabic

collocation “يشمخ أنفه”, which literally means in English “to turn his nose up”, into “hold her head high”. Such a collocation in Arabic expresses pride where the Arabic noun “أنف” “nose” collocates with the Arabic verb “يشمخ” “to turn up” or “hold high”. In contrast to Arabic, the English word “nose” never collocates with “hold high”, however; the same word “nose” collocates with “turn up” in the sense of reject or disdain. This semantic shift is a positive move by Khouri as it reflects his commendable effort in establishing a correct translation equivalence between the two different language systems. Khouri is aiming here at conveying properly the source language message in a communicative manner while preserving the target language structure. In fact when the translator wants to such an aim he/she may need to alter the structure of the text so that it may conform to the target language norms as Khouri does successfully. Literal translation, as most scholars claim, should be excluded as it fails to convey such types of collocation and the suitable target language equivalent should be used instead.

On the other hand, the translator does not manage to give an accurate rendition of the Arabic word “يميس”. His choice, “swinging to and fro proudly”, can be used as a translation equivalence to the Arabic verb “يميد” rather than “يميس”. Despite the fact that both words are considered as synonyms in Arabic, each suggests a different meaning from the other. The word “يميد” suggests the act of moving from one side to another forcefully, whereas “يميس” carries the meaning of moving from side to side lightly (al-Hadi ila al-Lughati al-Arabiyyah: Arabic-Arabic Dictionary) [6]. Moreover, the translator’s selection misses the communicative value of “light beautiful movements of branches and flowers” that the Arabic word “يميس” possesses and which is, in this case, rather more important than the sense. Likewise, another problem that can be noticed in Khouri’s translation is his use of redundancy in translating the Arabic verb “يميس”. The phrase “to and fro” that stands side by side with the English verb “swing” does not give a new meaning since “swing” might be used alone to indicate “to and fro”. Such an addition gives us the impression that Khouri, himself is not satisfied with his selection. Khouri, as a literal translator, tries to keep the channels open with his readers by resorting to additions “to make the source language text conform to a great extent to the ‘relevant’ ready-made utterances in the target language.” as Lefevere points out [2].

33. قد كان لي يا نهر قلب ضاحك مثل المروج

34. حر كقلبك فيه أه — وأمال تموج

35. قد كان يضحى غير ما يمسي ولا يشكو الملل

36. واليوم فد جمدت كوجهك فيه أمواج الأمل

37. فتساوت الأيام فيه : صباحها ومسائها

38. وتوازننت فيه الحياة : نعيمها وشقاؤها

39. سيان فيه غدا الربيع مع الخريف أو الشتاء  
40. سيان نوح البائسين ، أو ضحك أبناء الصفاء  
41. نبذته ضوضاء الحياة فمال عنها وانفرد  
42. وغدا جمادا لا يحن ولا يميل إلى أحد  
43. وغدا غربيا بين قوم كان قبلا منهم  
44. وغدوت بين الناس لغزا فيه لغز مبهم  
45. يا نهر ذا قلبي أراه كما أراك مكابلا  
46. والفرق انك سوف تنشط من عقالك وهو..لا

33. I once had, O river, a heart laughing like the meadows.  
34. As free as your heart, a heart in which passions and hope surged.  
35. My heart used to wake in the morning different from what it had been in the evening, not complaining of boredom.  
36. But today I have become hardened like your face in which there are waves of hope.  
37. The days have become all alike in my heart, their mornings and their evenings.  
38. Life in it has become the same, its happiness and its misery.  
39. For my heart the spring with autumn and the winter have grown alike.  
40. Alike are the moans of the miserable and the laughter of the merry.  
41. The turmoil of life has banished my heart which has turned away from life and become solitary.  
42. It had become hard neither showing affection nor feeling sympathy for any one.  
43. My heart has become a stranger among people to whom it formerly belonged.  
44. I have become among men a riddle, in whom there exists an obscure riddle.  
45. O river of my heart, I see my heart as I see you, bound...  
46. With one difference; that you will set free from your bonds, where my heart will never be set free.

In dealing with the above set of lines the translation appears successful except for the thirty-sixth line where Khouri alters the whole meaning. This change comes as a result of his different use of the pronominal suffix "ت" in the Arabic verb "جمدت". In the original line the poet says that on his face, the waves of hope have become frozen like those on the surface of the river. The pronominal suffix "ت" in the verb "جمدت" refers to the Arabic phrase "أمواج الأمل" which is used as the subject according to the correct structure of the Arabic line. However, Khouri gives a plausible rendition although he has made such a shift in his rendition of the original line to give a meaningful translated version. Moreover, he succeeds in rendering the Arabic collocation "أمواج الأمل" literally as it is an open collocation where literal translation may be used, as pointed out in Chapter Three of this study. On the other hand, as soon as Khouri discovers that literal translation will not be able to give a suitable version of



the Arabic verb “توازن”, deviates from literalness. Therefore, he uses “has become all the same” rather than using the literal translation of the Arabic verb “توازن” which is “to counterbalance” or “to balance”. On the other hand, the implied simile in the forty-second line of the Arabic text, is not produced in Khouri’s translation of “وغدا جمادا”. In translation it becomes “it has become hard” whereas in the original line it is used as “it becomes like a lifeless object”, where one can observe that the essential part of the original simile is not precisely rendered. However, it seems that this translation is given by Khouri to preserve the communicative value of the Arabic noun “جمادا” on the one hand and to achieve economy in translation on the other. By contrast, Khouri’s rendition of the forty-sixth line is characterized by verbosity. The Arabic word “الفرق” is rendered by using more than one word where it could be translated into “the difference” rather than “with one difference”. In addition, the Arabic word “لا” might be also rendered into “mine no” rather than “my heart will never be set free”. This is exactly what most literal translators do, as Lefevere warns, when they try to explain the source language text in an attempt to improve both the original and the translated texts, however, the result will be neither this nor that [2].

## **2. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this poem, seen as a whole, is in a completely intimate and somewhat sad register. It is an indirect statement of someone who is totally heartbroken and depressed. Even if it is recited in an absolutely bland and colourless fashion, this poem would still be glitteringly sentimental, with diction which connotes a perturbed heart. Its nature is rather straightforward, and never loud in voice. It presents its own way of being spoken.

To sum up, the poem sounds over-romantic in Arabic. This is why the reading of the poem in the original leaves us with a sense of sadness. There are no highs and lows, as there are in the translation. There are good moments in the translated text, however, and the best of them are cited in various places throughout this discussion. It is a matter of balance that few translators know how to capture its precise equivalence, which demands not only an intellectual translator but also, and above all, an artist, who knows how to listen to every sound in each word and is able to transfer that beauty into another tongue.

Khouri’s translation method undergoes a number of shifts as discussed above, yet he mainly follows the literal translation scheme; he makes several deviations when he discovers that his translation will fall far short of conveying properly the source language material. What emerges from this effort of Khouri is an interesting paradox. While the translator tries to be literal, he fails to produce the beautiful elements of the translated poem and thus resorts to several deviations to compensate for the loss resulting from the process of translation.

Besides the loss of metre and rhyme in literal translation, the distortion of the sense equivalence, the communicative value and the syntax of the source text can be observed in many places, as Lefevere has warned [2]. In several places, Khouri has not been able to give the correct sense equivalence because of the special overtones of the Arabic words used by the poet. This does not mean that the translator is incapable of rendering them in English; rather it is the subtle meaning that some Arabic words carry which poses many such problems.

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