

Cultural Identity in Sinan Antoon's Self-Translated "The Corpse Washer"

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Abstract

Self-translation can be a powerful tool in the transmission of cultural identity. The Baghdad-born American Sinan Antoon, as self-translator of his successful novel "*The Corpse Washer*", was awarded the Banipal Saif Ghobash prize for his invisibility and fluency in the Target Language, English. Accordingly, he is expected to have domesticated the Source Text cultural idiosyncrasies in the Target Text at the expense of accuracy, and met the English reader expectations in consequence. Apparently, he has accomplished a readable translation. Still, it is assumed that he has also chosen to be visible in many instances of his self-translation. Such visibility is substantiated by retaining the Arabic cultural items in English through foreignization. There is ambivalence here. Antoon's intended visibility as a self-translator is attributed to his emotional and cultural involvement in the cause of his country of origin, Iraq. His self-translation is an attempt to avoid cultural alienation, make a difference, let the Target Text readers be aware of his cultural identity, and achieve universality.

Keywords: cultural identity, domestication versus foreignization, invisibility versus visibility, self-translation

1. Introduction

Cultural identity is one of the essential concepts in sociology, sociolinguistics and cultural and translation studies. Because of the predicament of globalization versus tribalization in the present world, the expression of cultural identity has been closely discussed in the translation between two languages and cultures. The cultural identity of a nation or a group of people can axiomatically be manifested in the linguistic exchanges made by users of the language concerned.

In the present paper, cultural identity is seen to be more related to self-translation practice since the self-translator's task may not only involve translating but also preserving the Source Text (ST) cultural identity in the Target Text (TT). The case under study is of Sinan Antoon's self-translated novel "*The Corpse Washer*" from Arabic into English. Translations into English have usually been dominated by domestication method where the translators tend to be invisible and achieve fluency so as to be accepted by the TT audience (See Venuti, 1995/2008). Although Antoon was awarded a prestigious prize for being invisible and fluent as a self-translator of "*The Corpse Washer*", it is hypothesized that he has also been visible in the TT as far as cultural identity is concerned. His motivations for being visible are argued to be a matter of ethical choice and a desire to contribute to the cultural memory store of his country of origin, Iraq. This is a first-hand perspective from which the self-translation of an Arabic modern novel into English, in general, and Antoon as self-translator, in particular, is studied. A consistent blend of theoretical views and analyses is utilized to (in)validate the hypotheses.

2. Cultural Identity and Self-Translation

The concept of cultural identity is simply described as the person's sense of belonging to a particular culture or group. This fact dictates learning about and accepting traditions, heritage, language, religion, ancestry aesthetics and social structure of a culture. Nowadays, many issues of post-colonialism, cultural memory, globalization, language and translation are mediated through the discourse of cultural identity (Note 1).

Hall (1990), for instance, sees cultural identity in one shared culture which provides stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning. This oneness, underlying all the other superficial differences, is the truth about the identity that must be discovered, excavated and represented. This conception has played a critical role in all post-colonial struggle to unearth the past of the colonized people through writing, cinema, art, etc. But the same concept is problematized by Hall (1990, p. 222) who prefers to describe cultural identity as

production which is never complete. He proposes another view, it is a matter of becoming as well as being, namely, cultural identity belongs to the future as much as the past. A national culture is not a “folklore”, it is the “whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence” (Fanon, 1963, p. 188 in Hall, 1990, p. 237). Similarly, the cultural memory of a group contributes to the “concretion of identity” by preserving the store of knowledge where the group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity (Assmann, 1995, p. 130). A second characteristic of cultural memory is its capacity to reconstruct, namely, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation, not merely to its historical archive. The third characteristic is formation, that is, the crystallization of shared knowledge is a prerequisite of its transmission in the culturally institutionalized heritage of society, for example, by writing or by any other media.

Snell-Hornby (2000, p. 13) views cultural identity as a community’s awareness of and pride in its own features, and the individual’s sense of belonging to that community whether by birth or language, but implies that they still can communicate and exist in harmony with other communities. It must be practiced and expressed, as in language and translation, constructively in a world divided between two extremes of globalization and the so-called tribalization. According to Cronin (2006, p. 120) there is an inevitable relation between cultural identity and translation since the latter is a bridge “which connects different experiences, belief systems and cultural practices and open the door to a whole new way of experiencing and interpreting the world”. The bridge can be that of self-translation instead despite the fact that it may have its own implications for cultural identity.

Self-translation, in essence, involves the translation of an original work, say, a novel into another language by the author himself. The author is usually bilingual and bicultural, and may resort to self-translation for a variety of purposes, such as to increase the number of readers, to escape the confines of one language to another, to preserve the cultural identity in the colonial context or linguistic hegemony or simply for distrust in others’ translations (See Al-Omar, 2012, pp. 212-213). Unlike the translator *per se*, the self-translator is thought to be freer in introducing changes, additions or deletions to the ST or even creating a new text in the Target Language (TL). Both versions are valid and should be appreciated since they are produced by the original author. The many changes made may be ascribed to mediation (See Jung, 2004; Al-Omar, 2012; Rabacov, 2013), when the TT naturalness is given priority. Self-translation is when the author reproduces a literary text in another language (Whyte, 2002, p. 64). Given these assumptions, the author’s cultural identity is ignored.

Discussing Beckett as self-translator and author, Scheiner (1999, p. 180) dismisses the view that self-translation is out of any culture. We must highlight the cultural element of the original and examine the author concerned as a “locus” through which to study the intersection of literature, language, culture and identity. According to this view, the cultural identity/context of a particular author gives rise to the creation of a literary text addressed to a specific audience. Because of the seemingly contradictory status of the self-translator author as a member of a given society and as a foreigner, the self-translation act will provide insights into the author’s relationship to each culture and illustrate the troublesome nature of translation. So like many fellow self-translators, Beckett recreates himself and his text for he envisions a new audience and culture.

On the other hand, Santoyo (2010, p. 14) contends that cultural identity presupposes shared elements firmly localized in time and place, so he quotes a Puerto Rican self-translator as saying that “transference between two cultural identities is impossible” since one of them should be sacrificed. This idea may also apply to translation proper. With the globalization of many aspects in this world such as food, sport, technology, etc. many more of the previously-culture-bound terms have become easily grasped by non-native speakers. The self-translator, however, is said to work in freedom even when dealing with cultural aspects, he is not subject to criticism regarding accuracy because he is mainly concerned about the TT audience satisfaction. Santoyo (2010, pp. 23-30) cites many examples of translations between English and Spanish that fall within cultural identity like geographical dialects, word games, substandard uses and idioms where the self-translators have omitted, changed or swapped in the TT for fear of not being understood by the TT readers. Obviously, cultural identity is at stake here.

Similarly, Bandin (2004, p. 36) sees the self-translators as inhabiting the space between not only two languages but also two cultures and they have to live with the tensions inherent in such situation. Fidelity and equivalence to the ST have no place here because the TT is a recreation of the ST, i.e., there is sameness in difference. This difference is used as a tool by many committed writers/self-translators who regard their work as an important part of their struggle against the (neo)colonial powers (Bandin, 2004, p. 37). Of course, their aim is to leave political and social impacts on the TT readers by maintaining the original author’s identity. To sum up, any self-translated text is expected to be a perfect replica or a substitute of the original because of the assumed sameness of intention of writing and self-translating, even if the cultural identity of the author is compromised in

the TT. The argument, however, may be directed towards a unique case of self-translation from Arabic into English where cultural identity is believed to have been intentionally preserved in the TT. But before proceeding with the case concerned, it is advisable to lay some theoretical background from translation studies. Venuti's (1995/2008) differentiation between the invisibility and visibility of the translator is relevant as will be seen below.

3. The Translator's Invisibility versus Visibility

Translation studies scholars have paid little attention to the self-translation phenomenon because they believed it was more related to bilingualism than to translation proper (Grutman, 1998). It is argued that like translation proper, self-translation involves transcoding between two languages, and its practitioners follow various purpose-oriented translation strategies.

Invisibility is used by Venuti (1995, p. 1) to describe the translator's situation and activity in contemporary Anglo-American culture. It is maintained when the translator translates "fluently" into English to produce a natural TT and creates an "allusion of transparency" in the TT culture. This means that: a translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text—the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the "original" (Venuti, 1995/2008).

Fluency and transparency are taken to be the criteria of good translation at the expense of accuracy. This means that the ST linguistic idiosyncrasies are "domesticated" in the TT. Domestication is the term used to maintain the translator's invisibility, and it entails translating in a transparent, fluent style in order to minimize the foreignness of the TT in terms of cultural values and literary canons. The other term is 'foreignization' which involves a translation method opposite to the dominant values of the TL. It considers cultural intervention which seeks "to send the reader abroad" by making the receiving culture aware of the linguistic and cultural differences inherent in the foreign text (Venuti, 2008, pp. 15-16). Thus, foreignization makes visible the presence of the translator, and highlights the foreign cultural identity of the ST to the TT readers. Venuti (2008), however, stresses that domestication and foreignization are not binary opposites but rather part of a continuum and a matter of ethical choice made by the translator.

4. Sinan Antoon as Self-Translator

Sinan Antoon's (2011) second novel, *Wahdaha shajarat al rumman*, [The Pomegranate Tree Alone] (Note 2), was translated by the author into English as "The Corpse Washer". The novel is about Jawad, born to a traditional family of corpse washers and shrouders in Baghdad, decides to abandon the family tradition, choosing instead to become a sculptor, to celebrate life rather than tend to death. He enters Baghdad's Academy of Fine Arts in the late 1980s, in defiance of his father's wishes and determined to forge his own path. But the circumstances of history dictate otherwise. The dictatorship and economic sanctions of the 1990s destroy the socioeconomic fabric of society. The 2003 invasion and military occupation unleash sectarian violence. Corpses pile up, and Jawad returns to the inevitable washing and shrouding. Trained as an artist to shape materials to represent life aesthetically, he now must contemplate how death shapes daily life and the bodies of Baghdad's inhabitants. Through the struggles of a single desperate family, Sinan Antoon's novel shows us the heart of Iraq's complex and violent recent history (Antoon, 2013, the synopsis). It also shows the author's willingness to deeply tackle his country's dilemmas in a sophisticated manner.

In one year, 2014, the novel was long listed for the Independent International Fiction Prize, won the Best Arab American Book Award and the Saif Ghobash Banipal prize for Literary Translation (www.sinanantoon.com). The Banipal press release, which announced its 2014 winner, notes that Antoon has come close to the "ideal of literary translation—the *invisibility* of the translator" and praised his "*fluent* and forthright language" (www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/press.cfm).

The director of Yale University press, the publisher of the English version, expressed his pleasure and commented on the award by saying, "We hope the award will help bring the book to the attention of new readers who want a viscerally powerful portrait of life in contemporary Iraq" (www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/press.cfm). Seeking a wider readership is a legitimate goal for any self-translator but it may not be the only one. Antoon had stated he had "a kind of depression" after having lived so intensely with his characters for three years that he wanted to go back to be with them again and did not want anyone else to translate it but himself (Forbes, 2015). He also admitted that translating the novel "was challenging on many a level but it had its advantages as well. The author and translator inhabited the same person and could communicate very well most of the time", and

added, “Translation is vital act and is underappreciated especially from languages of the Global South” (Forbes, 2015).

Apparently, Antoon’s self-translation of his successful novel has been a matter of both emotional and ethical choice, in the first place (Note 3). An emotional choice because he did not want to be separated from his characters so soon, and an ethical one because he believed he should contribute to translation from a language of “Global South”, namely, Arabic. Any language, including Arabic, is the carrier of its people’s cultural identity. It is assumed that Antoon as self-translator, has made himself visible by foreignizing the ST cultural items in the TT. An ambivalence may be noticed if this assumption and Banipal’s reason, namely, visibility and invisibility of the same translator are understood in terms of a binary relationship. The following discussions are to sort things out.

5. Sinan Antoon and Cultural Identity

Before attempting to discuss Sinan Antoon’s approaches to translating the cultural items in the “The Corpse Washer”, it might be useful to have a general idea about his cultural identity as manifested in his own statements, among other things, about bilingualism and genres and topics of his interest. Antoon is a bilingual : he writes essays in English and novels in Arabic, but he stresses, “I feel more at home in Arabic”, “it is very dangerous and counterproductive when one discounts the importance of his mother tongue” and warns that those who embrace a foreign language rather their own first language will be alienated (Forbes, 2015).

Antoon also confirms that the writer’s role is to write well and beautifully and be responsible by writing what is relevant to his society and the world (Omar, 2010). Complicated topics of memory, identity, culture, and displacement seem to reign Antoon’s main literary works. These works reveal that he has used Arabic as reservoir of memory and he is tied emotionally and culturally to his country of origin, Iraq, but he is critical of its unending dilemma. Obviously, Antoon’s writings, including the novel under study, demonstrate his involvement in many causes, one of which is representing cultural identity. Self-translation can be seen a tool which Antoon has utilized to preserve this identity in another language.

6. Discussion of the Translation of Cultural Items in “The Corpse Washer”

One of the means by which cultural identity is realized in the “The Corpse Washer” “is the use of many culture-specific items throughout the novel. These items are too closely related to the Baghdadi lifestyle and cultural properties that only the locals can decipher, let alone the foreigners. Because of his “poetical license” as the original author, Antoon could have chosen to be invisible as self-translator by skipping or domesticating many of those culture-specific items without running the risk of rendering the TT unintelligible . Instead, he has chosen to be visible by foreignizing them in the TT. In other words, he has brought the TT readers to the original (Venuti, 2008, p. 16) by introducing the ST culture to those readers vividly and implicitly (Note 4). To achieve this, few strategies are used such as transliteration, transliteration plus glossing, transliteration plus footnoting, and translation. Since all examples are taken from Antoon (2013), it is found more convenient to refer only to the numbers of pages, unless indicated otherwise.

6.1 Transliteration

Many culture-specific proper nouns, terms of address and cultural institutions are only transliterated into English letters without any comments or glosses that may help the TT readers to understand or appreciate their locality. The use of “voice of *Zuhoor Hussein*” (p. 17) is not followed by explaining that she was a darling female singer in Baghdad many years ago. Antoon has used terms of address such as “*Sayyid*” and “*Ustadh*” (p. 100, 124). Each has a contextual significance in the novel. The former usually refers to any male descendant of Imam Hussein, grandson of Prophet Muhammad. Thus, he is usually highly respected by the local people. Jawad, the protagonist, is addressed as *Ustadh* by his assistant in the corpse washing business. It is an address of respect to someone higher in position. However, Antoon might have thought the sense is implied in Jawad’s humble objection later, “I told him that *ustadh* was not necessary” (p. 125). “*Kleicha*”, the famous home-made Iraqi cookies, is given by Antoon (p. 174) as simply “walnut-and-date *klaycha*” that Jawad eats during his journey to the borders, and without indicating its equivalence to cookies or being the preferred food for long distance travelling . The piece of traditional long black cover worn by women only, “*abaya*” (p. 9) is also left without a gloss, though the context requires an explication (see 6.4. below).

6.2 Transliteration plus Gloss

The addition of glosses as explications to transliterations can help the TT intelligibility. Antoon (pp. 5, 6 & 11) respectively uses “*suftas* -three small copper pots, each staked on top of the other in a metal skeleton”, “*mghasilchi*, a body washer” and “*mghasil*, the washhouse”. Though the last two may seem inconclusive in

senses but the context clarifies them. The words “park” and “market” are added to “*Madinat Alalab*” and “*Shorja*” respectively (pp. 81 & 109). There is also a gloss used for disambiguating a language-specific example of cultural implication, “communist” is added to *Shiyui* to differentiate between *Shiite* and *Shiyui* (p. 90) which have occurred together in the text. Such addition was obviously needless in the Arabic version.

6.3 Transliteration plus Footnote

Contrary to the expected in such texts where culturally-specific items prevail, footnotes to explain them are scant. Footnotes are age-old preferences of translators *per se* or self-translators for their role in the better understanding and appreciation of TT in general. Publishers, however, may ask the translators to keep them to the minimum to save space or to lessen the complexity of the printed book. Some translators may choose not to resort to many footnotes to evoke the TT readers’ curiosity in a way or another. Only three items in the novel are explained by footnotes: “*turba*”, “*althawra or alsadr city*” and “*masguf*” (pp. 62, 89 & 95).

6.4 Translation

Some culture-bound items are translated into English without explaining their significance as cultural signs of habits, traditions, food or drink. When Jawad’s martyred brother is brought home, “mother was already out in the street in her nightgown without *abaya*” (p. 9) This is a vivid description of what happens to a mother, who is so shocked by the news that she does not care for her modesty at the moment. If *abaya* were translated, the image would be clearer in the TT. Speaking of the clothes, Antoon (p. 37) describes and translates Jawad’s colleague as “wearing a gray skirt and a white shirt”. The colours are not randomly chosen for they represent the uniform of university students in Iraq.

The examples of “tea...the scent of cardamom filled the room”, “a white cheese sandwich and a cup of tea” and “yellow rice ...mixed with almonds, raisins and pieces of chicken” (pp. 17, 36 & 49) are only few of the typically known food and drink of specific flavours, smells and colours in Iraq. Moreover, “The Arabic jasmine...” (p. 111) is but an only-in-Baghdad-grown flower. The cultural mythical practice to “sprinkle water behind his car to make sure he returned” (p. 97) is not even missed by Antoon.

Attention should be directed to the translation of other culture-specific elements where foreignization is clear. When Jawad’s father receives the brothers of a dead man he is supposed to wash, he expresses his condolences by saying “May God have mercy on him”, the elder replies, “May God have mercy on your loved ones” (p. 18). And when Jawad leaves to his work, his mother wants to wish him well, she “enlisted God, Muhammad and Ali to accompany me” (p. 124). These examples represent highly salient linguistic choices and culturally convey solidarity between the speakers, akin to ceremonial dialogues in a given culture (Urban, 1990, p. 99). Their translations may fall within “exoticizing” which aim to preserve the local colour of the ST in the TT (Nord, 2005, p. 81).

Exoticization as a translation strategy is believed to have helped TT readers to acknowledge or even accept what *a priori* is alien to them (Carbonell, 2004, p. 30). This presupposes that TT readers usually formulate a number of expectations as to the culture-specific elements they may encounter in a novel translated from Arabic. This view is typical of the Western depiction of the exotic East. It cannot be denied that Antoon has tried to signal a difference from English canons. And different he was.

7. Conclusion

Self-translation is viewed as a bridge which connects different cultural identities because the self-translator is assumed to inhabit the space between not only two languages but also two cultures. The commonly-held idea is that self-translators become invisible when they recreate new texts for TT audience by domestication. Other self-translators who aim to leave a cultural impact on their TT audience are meant to be visible by foreignization. Sinan Antoon has self-translated his novel “The Corpse Washer” from Arabic into English and was awarded a prize for being invisible in the TT. However, he has been proved more of a visible self-translator too. He has opted for regaining the ST cultural idiosyncrasies in the TT without resorting to orientalist clichés but via details closely related to a particular place and time. Such a situation is compatible with his pride in writing in his mother tongue, Arabic, which is the reservoir of cultural memory, and with his commitment to write what is relevant to the people. By being visible as self-translator in English, he has confirmed and declared his cultural identity. Actually, Antoon could achieve the ambivalence of cultural rootedness and universality.

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Notes

Note 1. Only the views that may serve the present paper's aims will be highlighted.

Note 2. Sinan Antoon is a poet, novelist, translator, and scholar. He was born and raised in Baghdad where he finished a B.A in English at Baghdad University in 1990. He left to the United States after the 1991 Gulf War. He was educated at Georgetown and Harvard where he obtained a doctorate in Arabic Literature in 2006. Antoon is a member of the Editorial Review Board of the Arab Studies Journal. He is an Associate Professor at New York University's Gallatin School (www.sinanantoon.com).

Note 3. Antoon wrote four novels in Arabic, which were all translated into other languages but he self-translated only “The Corpse Washer.”

Note 4. Antoon excellently and elaborately describes the rituals of corpse washing and burying both in ST and TT on account of their significance in the novel’s main theme. The translation of those rituals are not discussed here since they fall within the Islamic practices that can be followed not only in Iraq but also in other countries.

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