The transfer of cultural references and political expressions in "A Promised Land" autobiography from English to Arabic in light of Bassnett's cultural theory.

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Abstract:

There is no doubt that an author sharing their own experience in an original piece, such as an autobiographical account, is dissimilar to having it shared by others. Translation is not about transferring a text from one language to another, but it is about transferring a real human experience from one culture to another. This research aims to study the transfer of cultural references and political expressions of Barack OBAMA's autobiography entitled "A Promised Land" through the lens of Susan Bassnett cultural theory since it emphasizes that translation is not a linguistic transfer, but a cultural one. This study underlies the role of cultural negotiating in rendering cultural, political, ideological meanings in the autobiography.

Key words: Autobiography translation, Cultural theory, Political and cultural references.

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Introduction: Autobiography allows the human continuity through sharing experiences in an original piece. The translator becomes a universal co-author where his translation is recognized by the world and his name is written in the book cover. The transfer of life writings can be challenging even for the experienced translator, due to the sensitive nature of the autobiographical context, which intensifies the challenge; for instance, in the political field, the translator "I"

interferes directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, and positively or negatively. This research aims to study the Arabic translated version "الأرض الموعودة" translated by Carole Haddade, Adonis Salem, and Abd Ayas in 2021, of Barack OBAMA's autobiography entitled "A Promised Land", 2020, Penguin Random House, focusing on certain cultural references and political expressions by applying Susan BASSNETT cultural theory in translation, since it emphasizes that translation is not just a linguistic transfer, but also cultural one. The personal and political nature of this autobiography raises the following questions: Was the translator successful in crossing the cultural bridge? Which technique did he apply to overcome certain boundaries? Did he convey the intended meaning of the author? Did he preserve the same tone? All these questions will be answered according to the cultural theory in translation prescriptive to understand the translator's choices when dealing with cultural references and political expressions. Besides, this study will contribute in revealing the cultural challenges, and will develop a broader discussion of the translator's cultural mediation in translating this type of life accounts. The findings of this research reveal that translating cultural and political references is challenging and require a cultural negotiation to balance between loss and gain.

2. Theoretical framework

1.2 Autobiography as a literary genre:

Since this study investigates the translation of an autobiography and life accounts, it is preferred to have a glimpse about an autobiography as a literary genre first, moving to its context under the large umbrella of translation studies. According to Schwalm (2014), "autobiography as a literary genre signifies a retrospective narrative that undertakes to tell the author's own life, or a substantial part of it, seeking (at least in its classic version) to reconstruct his/her personal development within a given historical, social and cultural framework" (p. 14). However, despite the fact that an autobiography is a literary genre, some people use it interchangeably with other genres and forms of writing, without coming to know the slight difference between them.

The interchangeable use of terms is confusing, particularly autobiography with memoirs, diaries, etc. As pointed out by Philippe Lejeune (1975/1989), it has to meet four conditions in order to be considered an autobiography. It must be written in a prose form, narrate the personal life, establish an identity pact between author, narrator and protagonist, and adopt a retrospective perspective, whereas the other genres closely related to autobiography do not comply with or share all four aforementioned conditions (p.4).

These elements reflect Lejeune's own definition of autobiography; however, the validity of his conditions has been questioned. Smith and Watson (2010), by contrast, view autobiography as a life narrative that includes many forms of self-representation. They shifted the focus away from factual truth (Lejeune's main concept) which cannot be verified or proven, toward a focus on the ways in which the self is narrated. For them, identity is not fixed but rather an intersubjective process between the narrator and the reader in order to produce shared meaning and to reach a common ground of understanding within the act of storytelling (pp. 16-17).

It appears that the two definitions move in opposite directions. Lejeune's rules shape autobiography as a distinct literary genre, excluding the other forms of self-representation, where factual truth is the central criterion. By contrast, for Smith and Watson, truth is less important than identity performance and dialogue exchange between the writer and the reader. In fact, it may depend on the readers themselves; for instance, in political autobiography, the truth of facts matters, whereas, in other narratives, readers expect both sincerity and engagement in a dialogue.

From the perspective of translation, Lejeune's autobiographical pact of truth is problematic since language, culture, and context shift, particularly the fact that the translator is a mediator. Such shifts can affect and alter the pact of truth when some strategies such as adaptation or foreignization are employed. In contrast, Smith and Watson's concept of autobiography better accommodates the translator's role, since it emphasizes dialogue and the negotiation of meaning; then the translator is simply a negotiator.

2.2 Autobiography in Translation:

Autobiography was tackled from different angles, such as psychology, literary criticism, sociology, and more recently translation studies. It is not only a life narrative of the individual but also a cultural product that travels across languages, which makes its translation complex. It conveys values, ideologies, and culture that emerge within a given society. Autobiography and other forms of writing are considered meaningful objects in Translation Studies, especially when culture is involved. However, its status remains marginal within Translation studies. Kaindl (2025), notes that "In the field of Translation/Translator studies, however, research on translator autobiographies is still in its infancy" (p. 327). Here, he is clearly highlighting autobiographies written and translated by translators themselves, as a nascent area in Translation studies, which makes it an open field for contributions, especially in relation to culture and politics.

Similarly, Xu (2017), points out that the translation of autobiographies has received little academic attention with limited focus on how translators foreground certain aspects within translated autobiographies (p. 5). Her observation highlights the dearth of research on translated autobiographies and the lack emphasis on aspects like the narrator's identity, voice, ideology, etc. Although autobiography is a rich literary form, Kaindl describes it as an infant in Translation Studies, particularly self-translation, where translators are authors, narrators, and protagonists. Taken together, their insights are two sides of the same coin, underlining the limited attention that autobiography has received in Translation Studies. These observations point to significant gaps in the research with the potential for investigating questions of identity, culture, and ideology. From this standpoint, the field offers a fertile ground for a study that examines the transfer of political expressions and cultural references in the autobiography from English to Arabic.

A study conducted by Ayman Nazzal (2018) on Mourid Barghouti's autobiography "I saw Ramallah" translated into English by Ahdaf Soueif. The autobiography demonstrates the Palestinian and political identity of the author. He discusses in the theoretical framework the challenges and problems of translating autobiography especially the difficulties of transferring cultural bound expressions and emotive expressions from Arabic into English. Nazzal focused on analyzing cultural and emotive expressions and how they are rendered in translation. The work

frames translation as a cultural encounter and ideological negotiation; highlighting the translation strategies used to figure out the intended meaning and addressing the challenges faced by the translator. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the need for multi-dimensional strategy to translate such texts without relying on semantic or literal strategies only, in order to capture the pragmatic meaning of the text.

3. Political Discourse in Translation Studies

Political discourse occupies a crucial place in Translation Studies. The translation of the political text does not merely rely on the equivalence at word level, but it reflects by nature ideologies of the author or government or even the entire nation. Naturally, the translation of the political text is challenging for translators where they face very often obstacles to shape those ideologies, power, and representation of the "self" from the ST to the TT. It has been addressed by many scholars because of its sensitivity, such as Schäfnner (2004), argues that the political discourse relies on translation, since international reactions are often shaped by the translated versions rather than the original text; therefore, it is necessary to take into account the translation in order to analyze political texts as it shapes both linguistic and political behavior (p. 120). Since the same political text or speech can be translated in multiple ways, so each version convey different ideological perspectives, as the translator choices influence how this ideology is perceived in the target culture. In the case of autobiography, translation can be doubly challenging, since such texts are not purely politic but also personal, where the translator must render the author's emotions, tone of voice, and identity across cultures. Taken together, both translation studies and political discourse analysis must cooperate together in order to recontextualise the political content to fit the new culture.

Translators can be influenced by certain agendas or the demands of higher authority or the translation's initiators, which demonstrate that translation is not always innocent act, as pointed by Bassnett & Lefevre (1990), "Translation Studies shows is that translation, like all (re)writings is never innocent" (p.10). This highlight the restrictions imposed upon the translator when dealing with political texts, but it may be too general for autobiography, since the translator is not stressing

ideological dimensions only, but also negotiating the author's self, tone, and personal identity. In this context, translation becomes an act of political rewriting and cultural mediation, which give the translator the role of mediator.

4. Cultural theory in Translation

Early approaches in Translation Studies focused on micro-level of linguistic equivalence, for example; Catford's translation shifts and Nida concept of equivalence, without consideration of cultural contexts. However, there was a need to move beyond structural comparisons between the source text and the target text. This limitation leads scholars to consider translation in a cultural, social, and political context. Therefore, there was a cultural turn in Translation Studies pioneered by Susan Bssnett and Andry Lefevre in 1991, which shifted emphasis from a linguistic transfer to the importance of ideology and culture in reshaping translation. As Bassnet (2002), argues, "..for translation is not just the transfer of texts from one language into another, it is now rightly seen as a process of negotiation between texts and between cultures". (p.6). Here, she explicitly emphasizes that translation is not a linguistic transfer, but a cultural one, where the translator is an active agent in mediating culture and negotiation of meaning. This negotiation is the main core of cultural turn where the unit of translation is no longer a word or a phrase but the culture embedded within text.

Since the cultural turn reframe translation as a negotiation between cultures, than the translator becomes a negotiator. He has to interpret and explain cultural elements carefully, because his choice is going to affect the author's identity in the target culture and also the audience reception. Bassnet and Lefevre (1998), note that the process of negotiation is reflected by the institutional constraints and the translator personal input which affect how the text is received in the target culture (p.8). It involves two factors that shape the product, first it is the political and ideological pressure by governments or publishers or even social expectations, the translator is expected to adjust cultural references or reflect particular ideology or avoid certain topics that can be taboo in society. The second factor reflects the translator's own choices like applying certain strategy or style or even ideology. Together, they interact to shape how the text is received in the

target culture and they contribute to its development by introducing new ideas and norms and perspectives, this reinforce the view that translation is never neutral.

Politics, alongside culture shape translation practice, Yan and Huang (2014), stress that translation frequently used as a tool of political purposes such as propaganda, where translators emphasize some ideas that serve government needs and ideological agendas, given example to the feminist translators in 1970 changed texts by adopting strategies like: meta-text adding, hijacking, and supplementing in order to achieve their goal. Therefore, he stressed the need to a political accuracy, where the literal translation is not sufficient and it may sound politically awkward, so the translator role is to make it fit the political discourse and the current reality of the target culture (p.491).

This perspective demonstrates that translation is never innocent as Bassnett and Lefevre see, unlike functional theories (e.g. Skopos theory), which focuses on the text purpose and function, cultural approach focuses on shaping the act of translation by ideological, political, and cultural constraints. In this sense, political accuracy is a form of rewriting and manipulation within systems of power.

1.4 Rewriting:

Political and ideological influence is a manifestation of rewriting, as pointed out by Bassnett and Lefevre (1990), translation act is rewriting of the original content, and forms of rewriting regardless of their intentions including translation are shaped by ideology and poetics of the target culture. This process involves manipulation, often serving systems of power. Such manipulation can positively enrich literature and society by new concepts, ideas, and devices. At the same time, they also distort or suppress certain aspects of the text to serve ideological and political demands (p.xi). Rewriting is another crucial idea in the cultural turn by framing translation as rewriting, Bassnett and Lefevre foreground the active role of the translator in shaping meaning and cultural reception. This point lead to the critical question: to what extent the translator can preserve the author's voice, since he becomes a co-author who reshapes text for new audience.

2.4 Role of translator:

Bassnett (2002) argues, "it is now seen as a process of negotiation between texts and between cultures, a process during which all kinds of transactions take place mediated by the figure of the translator" (p. 6). In her view, translation involves a process of mediation between texts and cultures in which the translator makes decisions that shape meaning and cultural reception. This requires handling cultural references, addressing ideological differences, and adjusting discourse to suit the expectations of the target audience. Thus, the translator role lies in mediating, negotiating, and rewriting.

3.4 Loss and Gain:

Bassnett (2002), argues that the sameness of two languages is impossible, than the issue of loss and gain can be seen differently, and what is considered as loss in the source language context, can be simply replaced in the target language context and considered as a gain. For instance the translator can clarify or enrich the SL text through the act of translation (p.41). This means what is lost in one area can be compensated in another; allowing the original text to be revived in the new target culture context. Applied these two concepts to autobiography, raise questions about whether cultural references, political expressions, and the author's self are going to resist loss or they will be reshaped to gains, taking into account that gains may also open new interpretations.

5. Methodology

As a matter of fact, the content is full of political expressions and cultural references, the nature of autobiography helped to choose the Susan Bassnett's cultural theory as an analysis approach to study them in their cultural, political and ideological context, rather than linguistic level. The aim of this research is not to evaluate the accuracy of translation but to analyze the translator's choices in rendering such expressions.

6. Discussion and Analysis

In this section, I focused on analyzing some chosen examples of political expressions and cultural references in the autobiography, to be discussed through the lens of Bassnett cultural theory.

The former president of the U.S Barack Obama's identity can be seen as a reflection of the American identity, and a mirror of the American nation, whose essence lies in immigration, diversity, and openness to the other.

1.6. Cultural references & Political Expressions:

Example one: "A Promised Land"

The Arabic translation: "الأرض الموعودة"

The title itself has a cultural significance in some religions; this concept largely overlaps with the land of Palestine that God promised to give to the Jews as a reward according to the Abraham religions. In modern context, it is used as a symbol to reveal hope, freedom, and the vision of justice as Obama meant and wished for America to a more perfect union and a better life. In the political rhetoric, it functions metaphorically, as the title reveals both the religious dimension, and the ideological and political dimension.

The translation shift the personal aspiration political metaphor intended by Obama to the familiar Arabic connotation (often associated with the land of Palestine and it carries a heavy weight in the Arabic culture). According to Bassnett's cultural negotiation, here the translator opted literal calque rather than render it metaphorically. Thus, Obama's intended meaning is partly lost, since the translator preserved the religious reference only. This example strongly confirms Bassnett's view that translation is not neutral but a negotiation and mediation between cultures involving both loss and gain.

Example two: "The Fourth of July"

The Arabic translation: "4 تمّوز/يوليو"

In the American culture, it is not just a date, but the Independence Day from Britain where Americans celebrate it together. It carries a deep political and cultural significance like freedom, patriotism, and identity. The translator conveyed the literal meaning as a calendar reference without reflecting its historical and political significance in the American culture which mean that the Arabic reader may not recognize the meaning behind this expression. Thus, a cultural loss is resulted because of the translator's choice in rendering such expression. For an effective cultural negotiation, it has to be translated to "عيد الاستقلال الأمريكي الرابع من يوليو".

Example three: « American Dream »

The Arabic translation: "الحلم الأميركي"

This phrase has roots in the cultural and political ideology that every person in the united state has a freedom and an opportunity to succeed through hard work. It reflects the individual liberty and social immobility in the American identity. However, the process of translation preserved the linguistic level without its ideological weight. The translator did not clarify it in the text or in the footnote, although the Arabic reader may interpret it differently since he does not share the same cultural and ideological background of the author.

Example Four: "Yes we can"

The Arabic translation: "نعم يمكننا"، "نعم نستطيع"

The tagline of « Yes we can" appeared many times in the text, used by the president in his first presidential campaign, where he was willing to make changes to the system in order to improve the lives of citizens and encourage the power of unity. The translator rendered the slogan into two words, preserving the literal meaning without its cultural depth and political value. The Arabic version preserves the inspirational and motivational tone but the slogan's rhythm is lost. At the same time, rewriting it in the Arabic context, grant it a universality to function as a general motivational expression in many contexts beyond of Obama's political campaign. This example shows how rewriting reshape meaning in new ideological and cultural context.

Example five: "filibuster"

The Arabic translation: " إمكانية التعطيل"

Filibuster is purely political American term and a parliamentary procedure used in the U.S senate by members to prolong debate in order to prevent a decision or block voting. There is no such procedure in Arabic systems, and no Arabic direct equivalence to the term, therefore it is culturally untranslatable. As Bassnett suggests it can be compensated through adding a footnote or clarification to the Arabic reader who is not aware of the American parliament. The translator rendered the expression by capturing its effect which is obstruction.

Example six: "partisan gridlock"

The Arabic translation: "الجمود الحزبي"

Partisan gridlock refers to a situation when there is a difficulty of passing laws in the U.S government because the political parties refuse to compromise. The Arabic translation is understandable and functional in the political context. The translator has rewritten it to fit the target culture so the reader grasps its meaning; however it loses the resonance of tension and conflict in the original context.

7. Conclusion:

The present study shed light on some cultural references and political expressions in the autobiography of "A Promised land" in light of Bassnett's cultural theory which sees the translation process as a negotiation between cultures and not a linguistic transfer only. The initial findings seem to indicate that translation requires a careful mediation and negotiation between two different cultures since the target reader does not share the same references of the authors; given the example of 4th of July and the American dream show that translation involves a partial loss when rendered literally. The translator needs to compensate to preserve the intended meaning according to Bassnett's view. Similarly, the title "A Promised land" used metaphorically by the author to express hope, while the translator preserved the familiar religious connotation in Arabic.

This proves that rhetorical devices such as metaphors are challenging as cultural expressions. The literal translation in political discourse in not sufficient and seems awkward, like "filibuster" face complexity since it does not have the same dynamic equivalence in Arabic; however the translator choice allows the reception of its effect. Rewriting reshape meaning such as "yes we can" by granting it universality to be used in other contexts and motivation for the target audience.

Overall findings show the translator's role as negotiator and a mediator between cultures, whose choices affect the reader's comprehension, balancing between loss and gain, and reshaping meaning to fit the new target culture.

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