

# Idioms and Cultural references in the Translation of Muhsin Al-Ramli's Novel “Scattered Crumbs”

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**Abstract**— The present paper seeks to address the strategies adopted to translate into English a corpus of idioms extracted from the literary translation of Muhsin al-Ramli's novel "Scattered Crumbs"(Arabic version published in Cairo, 2000). The objectives of the paper are twofold. First, the theoretical part outlines the theoretical perspective on literary translation and then reviews the scene on idiomatic expressions, compares the various scholarly opinions on idioms and the translating strategies used in the literary context. Second, the practical aspect draws upon an analysis of a corpus of data collected from the above novel to arrive at the most frequent strategies applied by the translator, Yasmeean S. Hanoosh, in her translation for the novel "Scattered Crumbs" (2003), published by The University of Arkansas. The paper has also pedagogical implications. In comparing the idioms in the source text of the novel with their translations in English, translation tutors and practitioners can use the novel as a course book to teach translation strategies in literary translation courses. Using the real examples extracted from the novel, students can practice the most frequently used strategies in how to deal with/ and render a variety of idiomatic expressions.

**Keywords**— translation strategies, idioms, literary translation, colloquial, Muhsin al-Ramli.

## I. INTRODUCTION

As globalization increasingly requires communication among disparate peoples and cultures, translation can play a great role in bridging this linguistic and cultural gap and help increase the intercultural dialogue. News, culture, literature and sciences and others can all be shared by the help of translation.

Therefore, translation scholars put forward different definitions. For some, translation is defined as a “cross-cultural event” (Snell-Hornby, 2001, p.46). For Newmark (1981), translation is "a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language". Catford (1987), defines translation as the replacement of a textual material in one language (SL) by an equivalent textual material in another language (TL). Nida and Taber (1982: 12) see translating as a process of reproducing in the receptor language (RL) the closest natural equivalent of the SL messages first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style. In other words, translation is a transfer of meaning, message and style from one SL text to the TL text. For some translation theorists comes last in terms of priority.

## II. LITERARY TRANSLATION

Literary translation greatly differs from other forms of translation; it is one of the toughest ones of the profession. This is due to the fact that literary texts ( be it a story, poem, or any other types of literary works) are dominated by aesthetic, symbolic and metaphorical features which are meant to have an impact on the readers. Lander (2001, p.5) stated that literary translation is the act of “recreating in a new language” a work of literature. The literary translation needs to recreate the artistic image of the source text in the target text in addition to rendering the information. Therefore, the good work of literary translation becomes challenging task for the translator as it demands a high level of creativity to render these aesthetic features, to recreate the image, and to preserve the author's style to the full for the target reader.

Literary translation has always been very important, but modern literary translation and practices have an additional vital task, i.e. intercultural transfer. A good literary translation can offer readers an insight into foreign cultures. A translator has a choice between familiarizing readers with foreign elements or domesticate them and rob readers of a new and educating experience. The latter can be used a means of manipulation.

As a result, literary translators need to be armed with a very particular skillset as their work requires creativity in rendering the connotative meaning as well as the denotative meaning of the source text. For example, in translating a product information leaflet, it is essential to deliver the source text in a manner of word for word interpretation of the original. This process, however, cannot be carried out for the translation of prose and poetry. Linguistic knowledge only is not enough to bridge the gap between disparate languages and cultures. Literary translators need to be competent in the source and the target cultures.

Munday (2000: 7- 14) states that some translation scholars consider literary texts different from other texts just in terms of words and structures. However, others regard some other aspects besides word and structures. They contend that literary texts are the production of cultures. This is also related to the social aspects.

### 2.1 Literary Translation: Characteristics and Difficulties

There are various challenges in translating from a language into another different one. It is not surprising that literary translation is characterized by many features and difficulties. Some of these difficulties are related to culture, grammar, lexemes. As Rene Wellek and her co-author stated, "literary language is highly connotative. It abounds in ambiguities and —is full of homonyms, arbitrary or irrational categories such as grammatical gender; it is permeated with historical accidents, memories, and associations...moreover, literary language is far from merely referential. It has its expressive side..." (Theory of Literature p.23). Other translation scholars (Baker, 2000; Boase-Beir, 2011; Chanda, 2012; Monday, 2012; Newmark, 1998) demonstrated clearly in their research that miscomprehending the source text would definitely lead to the detrimental of the connotative meaning and aesthetic features of the literary works. Therefore, to obtain a high quality translation, literary translators should work painstakingly to ensure full comprehension and analysis for the source text as the language of literary works characterized by deviation from the norm by using symbols, alliteration, metaphor, idioms, and other linguistic features. Idioms and idiomatic expressions pose a great challenge for the translators which need them to pay a special care in rendering.

### 2.2 Arabic fiction Translation:

With the fall of Arabic ruling in Al-Andalus (1000s – 1100s), Arabic language and culture suffered a decline and suppression. There was no European interest in translating

from Arabic. However, in the early eighteenth century, the status quo changed as the European colonization era started in the region (Büchler and Guthrie 2011, p.16).

Over the years, it becomes obvious, that translating Arabic literature, especially fiction into English, is gaining popularity. According to Altoma ( 2005, p.54), Arabic fiction went through three phases: the initial phase ( 1947 – 1976): during this period, little interest in Arabic literary works among the Western readership as the Orientalist consider the literary works produced in Arabic are no more than social documents of no literary value. The second phase (1968 – 1988): some call it the expansion period as there was an academic interest in translating the Arabic literary works. The third phase (1988 – 2003): this period witnessed a full swing upward in the number of translation produced. It was marked by awarding the Nobel Prize for literature to Naguib Mahfouz in 1988. The prize a turning point which helped drawing a wide international interest in Arabic literature namely in fiction translation. Büchler and Guthrie (2011, p.7): "in the first years of the 1990s the average number of published translations was between two and eight per year, in the 2000s the average rose to between ten and sixteen, with twenty six translations from Arabic published in 2009" Currently, there are a number of prizes for translating the Arabic literature. The most famous ones are: International Prize for Arabic Fiction, Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation, Turjuman Award, *and others*.

### 3.1 Idioms: Definitions, Classifications, and Features

Idioms are an important integral and natural parts of all languages. But what is exactly an idiom? According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, idioms are expressions that "cannot be understood from the meanings of the words" alone, "but [that] have a separate meaning of their own," particular to a certain region or group of people".

On studying this linguistic phenomenon, language and translation researchers have a versatility of definitions. According to Dickins et al. (2017: 293), an idiom is "a fixed expression whose meaning cannot be deduced from the denotative meanings of the words that constitute it". On the same token, Larson (1998: 23) refers to idiom as "a string of words whose meaning is different from the meaning conveyed by the individual words".

Other linguists defined the idiom as " an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, 246). For example, the idiomatic expression "it rains

cats and dogs” cannot be understood from the meaning of each word separately and hence has nothing to do with the meaning of the idiom as a whole. Baker (1992) states that idioms and idiomatic expressions are " frozen patterns of languages which allow little or no variation in form and, in the case of idioms, often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components" (p.63)

As the subsequently-reviewed studies confirm, most translation scholars have an agreement on three features. Firstly, compositeness, that is, idioms are commonly understood as multiword expressions, secondly, institutionalization, that is, idioms are conventionalized expressions, and thirdly, semantic opacity, that is, the meaning of the idiom cannot be deduced from the meaning of its parts. Idioms can be an indication of high command of a language. Fernando (1996, p.25) asserts that " idioms not only ensure that our communication is coherent and cohesive, but they also produce discourse that is socially acceptable as well as precise, lively and interesting". In other words, using idioms can show more effectiveness and prove powerful in communication than literal non-idiomatic language (McPherron & Randolph 2014).

Maxos ( 2003) pointed out that speakers use idioms interchangeably both in spoken discourse and written discourse although sixty to seventy of idioms are used in spoken discourse (p.4). Ghazala ( 2003), highlighted the main features of idioms: idioms are all in all metaphorical and cannot be understood directly; they should not be taken literally as their meaning lies on their constituents rather than individual words; their syntactic form is usually fixed and cannot be changed or described as ungrammatical; their meanings are also invariable and they are mainly cultural and informal (p.204). Moreover, Ghazala (2003) classifies idioms into five categories: full and pure idioms, semi-idioms, proverbs, popular sayings and semi-proverbial expressions, metaphorical catchphrases and popular expressions (p.24).

### 3.2 Translating Idioms

One of the most challenging problems translators face in translation is rendering the culture-bound idioms especially for languages which are culturally apart like Arabic (a Semitic language) and English (an Indo-European language). However, translation researchers have conducted much relevant research to address idioms translation strategies. They reached a consensus on three interrelated tasks translators perform in rendering the idioms: recognizing the SL idiom, interpreting it, and then finding

the equivalent that would appropriately render the SL idiom in the TL with same impact it creates on SL readers.

In her seminal book, *In Other Words*, Baker (1992, p. 24) stresses that " the main problems that idiomatic and fixed expressions pose in translation relate to two main areas: the ability to recognize and interpret the idiom correctly; and the difficulties involved in rendering the various aspects of meaning that an idiom or affixed expression conveys into the target language".

Among the scholars who wrote about translation strategies to deal with idioms is Mona Baker (2011). She proposed the following:

1. Translating by using an idiom of similar meaning and form: this strategy involves replacing an source language (SL) idiom by a target language (TL) idiom which has almost identical meaning and form. This is the ideal procedure for translators in doing translation. However, it sometimes required to do structural shifts for the idiom due to the linguistic discrepancies between languages.
2. Translating by using an idiom of similar meaning but different form: if translators find it impossible to find an idiom counterpart in the target language with similar meaning and form, they would naturally choose the second strategy- an idiom of similar meaning but different form.
3. Translating by using paraphrasing strategy: The first and the second strategies are the mostly recommended to opt for by translators, if it is impossible to implement, translators would attempt to translate by paraphrasing- an idiom will be replaced by non-idiomatic language.
4. Translating by Omission: According to Baker ( 2011: 84), " this strategy involves only the literal meaning of an idiom in a context that allows for a concrete reading of an otherwise playful use of language"

### III. DATA ANALYSIS:

For the purpose of the present paper, the data consists of a corpus of 16 extracts of idiomatic phrases taken from the novel in both the original Arabic text and its English translation. In the analysis, a number of translation strategies have been identified to be applied by the translator. Applying Baker’s (1992/2011) strategies for translating idioms, the paper

1. Translation of Arabic idiomatic expression by using an idiom of similar meaning and form

#### Example 1

ST: "ولا دخان بلا نار كما تقول حكمة العجائز"

TT: "No smoke without fire, as the proverb of the old folk says" (p.72)

It is obvious that the translator used the first strategy ( similar meaning and similar form ) in dealing with idioms translation. The is the first and the best strategy translators use to render idioms. The idiom مكو دخان بلا نار is widely used in Iraqi dialect to refer to a suspicious situation when its effect is present but the cause is hidden. The same idiom is used in English with the same connotation.

## 2. Translating by using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form

Translators use this strategy to replace a cultural-specific reference or item in the source text with a target idiomatic expression which does not have the same form but can have the same meaning and create the same impact on the target reader as it does on the readers of the source text (Baker, 1992, p.31). The following examples apply to this strategy:

### Example 2

ST: "وحيث ينساه الجميع تماما باستثناء والدته (المكروده/ المهظومه)" -

TT: "Everyone forgot him completely with the exception of his wretched mother" (p. 7)

### Example 3

ST: "ولذلك كانت كل أيدينا كلنا على قلوبنا."

TT: "that was why I and all the rest of the hitchhikers were wiping the sweat from our brows" (p.8)

In Iraqi colloquial, people say أيدينا على قلوبنا when they are scared and use it to express their fear when they see or experience a dangerous situation. This is the intended meaning in the novel because the main character is experiencing danger as he was riding with the drunk driver in a dangerous terrain. To keep the same impact on the target reader, the translator did not replace it with total equivalent, rather she used a culture-specific expression in English ( **to wipe the sweat from brows**) which has similar connotative and denotative meaning but dissimilar form.

### Example 4

ST: "... والشيخ صالح يأمر بتزويجهما وستر عرض الناس."

TT: "Sheikh Salih is ordering that they get married to save the honor of our village" (p.12)

In this extract, the translator used an idiom which is similar in the propositional meaning in both the source and target languages but it has dissimilar form. To render the idiomatic expression ستر عرض الناس in the source text. In English, the expression ( save the honor) is usually used to express the same connotation.

## 3. Translation by using literal translation Strategy

### Example 5

ST: "تسللت عبر الشمال ليلا، وسائق الشاحنة معطلة الاضواء سكران ويغني بالكردية، قائدا للحديدة الراعدة عبر الدروب الملوية .."

TT: "I slunk away to the North at night with the drunken driver of a truck with broken lights. He sang in Kurdish, as he drove the thundering piece of iron" (p. 8)

The Arabic idiom "الحديدة الراعدة" is a common expression among Iraqi villagers and it is excessively used in their conversations to describe a car. The equivalent used in the target text is a literal translation "the thundering piece of iron".

### Example 6

ST: "فأن كل شاة تعلق من ساقها"

TT: "Each sheep is hung from its own foot" (p.42)

Iraqi especially the villagers use this culture-specific expression widely in their daily conversations to indicate that the person is who bears the consequences of his action and behavior and not others. In her attempt to render this expression, the translator failed to find an equivalent which carries the connotative meaning. She should have translated it by paraphrasing better than literal translation which causes misunderstanding for the target readers.

### Example 7

ST: "أنه لا يغضب أبدا .. بارد .. أبرد من مؤخرة بياع عصير السوس"

TT: "He never gets angry. He's cold, colder than the backside of the licorice juice vendor" (p. 54)

This is a culture-specific idiom which excessively used metaphorically, to refer to the degree of coldness, by villagers in Iraq to describe the lazy person who does not have much vitality and quickness in accomplishing his duties. Since the person who sells عصير السوس always carries a vessel which contains the cold (licorice juice) on his back, as a result his مؤخرة would be cold. To render it literally by the denotative meaning only does not which make sense for the target readers.

### Example 8

ST: "فرحان يفكر بالزواج من عائشة- امرأة رابعة- يحدد بها فراشه"

TT: "that Farhan is thinking about marrying Aisha- a fourth wife – to renew his bed" (p.13)

Also, this is one of the common used idiomatic expression in Iraqi colloquial; it is known between Iraqis and used humorously especially by villagers to refer to the person who intends to have another wife. The translator might be unfamiliar with it so she resorts to literal translation leaving

the target text reader alone to guess the meaning of the idiom.

#### Example 9

ST: "ما هذا الهراء .. أتكذب على لحية أبيك يا ولد؟!!"

TT: "What's this nonsense? Do you lie to your father's beard, boy?" (p.57)

This is a culturally specific idiom. The translator opts for literal translation. In Standard Arabic, the idiom is also used but in a slightly different structure الضحك على الذقون to indicate a situation when a person in charge make false promises just to keep others waiting but with no result and hope. Again, readers of the target text would face difficulty to understand the idiom as it is one of the colloquial culture-references in the novel. Larson (1998: 126) warns that "the real danger comes in translating an idiom literally, since the result will usually be nonsense on the receptor language".

#### Example 10

ST: "فتشعبت الاقوال, ومنها ذلك الذي اعدم بسبب قوله: "سيقطع (ذاك) الذي يحبه سعدي"

TT: "He'll cut off that which Saadi loves" (p.92)

Iraqis usually humorously use the demonstrative ذلك as a euphemistic term to refer to the (sex organs). In the source text, the 'referent' is easily understood by the readers, but to render it literally will cause misunderstanding at the part of the target text readers as they are to deduce the implicit meaning of the demonstrative (that).

#### 4- Translating by paraphrasing Strategy

#### Example 11

ST: "وعندما طالت الحرب أعواماً, وتذمر بعض الشيوخ حول دلال القهوة: "من عودة عبء العوائل على كواهلهم المغادرة"

TT: "When the war dragged on for years and some of the old men complained around the coffee-pots about the inability of departing shoulders to carry family burdens" (p.74)

The translator substituted the word دلال القهوة with (coffeepots) instead of transliterating as (Dallah) since it is a cultural item and it does not look like the regular coffeepot used in the western culture; it is has a long spout and different shape.

#### Example 12

ST: "واحد .. يركبك عبد الواحد, اثنين .. يركبك عمي حسين, ثلاثة .. في مؤخرتك شعاعة, أربعة .. يركبك مدير المطبعة, خمسة .. بك أدمسه, ستة .. بك .. بك .."

TT: "One, you'll mount someone. Two, I'll ram it in you. Three, you're screwed by Uncle Ali. Four, your ass is sore. Five, your father will drive. Six, we have longer dicks ..." (p.85)

#### Example 13

ST: "عشرة .. بك أحشرة"

TT: " Ten, I'll mount sissy men"(p.86)

The cultural terms in the above two extracts are usually used by children in the villages to play with words of the same rhyme and to mock at each other. They use these terms because of their rhyming- have the same final sounds but with different meaning; they are just like pun. The translator did great job by smartly using English terms in the target text to keep the rhyming. She chose paraphrasing just to ensure the main function behind these terms ( pun).

#### 5. Borrowing the source language idiom

#### Example 14

ST: "ييووووه يا مكرودة يا أم جاسم"

TT: "Yibooooooooo! Miserable Um Qasim" (p.87)

This interjection expression is normally used among the Iraqi women to express grief and sadness when someone passes away. Since the novel events reflected the calamities and sorrows the Iraqi society experienced during the war in the eighties, therefore it is expected that the characters would use these interjections. In dealing with these culture-specific expressions, translator transliterated these particles "ya" which is a feature of Iraqi colloquial. Their pragmatic impact is softened in the target text. Therefore, the translator should have clarified to the target text reader the connotative meaning of these particles but she only left the readers to depend on the linguistic context to grasp the meaning.

#### Example 15

ST: " وغطى زاوية رأسه البارزة بالعقال."

TT: "covered the protruding angle of his head with the headcord and kaffiyva" (p.100)

#### Example 16

ST: "At that time the boys only reached to my grandfather's navel- all the lads in dishdashas fluttering around like TV flags"

TT: " حينها كانت قاماتهم-جميعاً- تصل الى سرّة جدي كلهم صبية بدشاديش مرفوعة كأعلام التلفزيونات"

Baker (2011: 79) states that "... the use of loan words is a common strategy in dealing with culture-specific items,". In

Arabic, there are a lot of borrowed words such as ( pizza, parliament, glass, etc.). The translator resorted to borrowing strategy to render these culture-specific words *دشداشه* and *شماغ* (شماغ) into the target language although the word *شماغ* is not mentioned in the ST but the translator inserted it just to clarify the word *عقال* as they normally associated with each other to help ease the pressure on the target readers' comprehension to understand the word *عقال*.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Twenty idioms formed the basis of the analysis to account for the translator's strategies in dealing with culture-references and idioms. The focus was mainly on those expressions that might be problematic to translate due to missing equivalents, cultural specificities, etc. The aim of the paper was not to criticize, therefore, both correct and possibly erroneous translations were looked at. An explanation was given for the former and a solution was proposed for the latter.

In addition to that, one of the aims of the paper was to review literary translation and acquaint readers with its central roles and importance for increasing people's cultural understanding of each other. The paper also introduced a brief sketch of the landscape of contemporary fiction translation in the Arab world.

Then the paper, through the chosen examples, highlighted the translation pitfalls in the target text. Although the translator did a great job in her translation for the novel, she could not succeed in rendering some of the problematic idioms. Some translations for the examples were proven to be correct- the attentive translator managed to use correct transference and use of loan words for the absence of equivalency in the target text; however, in some examples, she failed to render those idioms where their equivalents are not found and opted for the literal translation which normally causes miscommunication.

The paper has also a pedagogical implication. The source text and its translation counterparts can be of great help for translation practitioners and tutors to adopt the novel as a course book in literary translation modules. Translation tutors can introduce the idioms to their students in a systematic and effective manner by describing accurately the meanings of idioms and their appropriate usage.

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