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Midaq Alley unveiled: Tendencies Toward the Translation of Egyptian Literature

El callejón de los milagros: *Tendencias en la traducción de la literatura egipcia*

Nawal ALFOZAN

University of Reading

n.alfozan.2014@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This study investigates the impact of cultural encounters and power imbalances on translated literature, specifically in the context of religious and social variations. It aims to contribute to the field of postcolonial translation studies by highlighting how these factors can lead to changes and improvements in translated works. The analysis focuses on the English Translation of *Midaq Alley*, which is rendered by two prominent translators, Trevor Le Gassick (TT1 and TT2) and Humphrey Davies (TT3). The study analyses the reflection of cultural characteristics, specifically religious and social aspects, by comparing Arabic passages with their corresponding English translations. The inquiry employs a postcolonial theoretical framework to analyse the impact of power dynamics and cultural imposition on English translations of Egyptian culture.

KEYWORDS: postcolonial theory; cultural translation; social aspects; Egyptian culture.

RESUMEN: Este estudio investiga el impacto de los encuentros culturales y los desequilibrios de poder en la literatura traducida, centrándose específicamente en las variaciones religiosas y sociales. Su objetivo es contribuir al campo de los estudios de traducción poscolonial, destacando cómo estos factores pueden conducir a cambios y mejoras en las obras traducidas. El análisis se centra en las traducciones al inglés de Callejón Midaq, realizada por dos destacados traductores: Trevor Le Gassick (TT1 y TT2) y Humphrey Davies (TT3). El estudio analiza cómo se reflejan las características culturales, específicamente los aspectos religiosos y sociales, comparando pasajes árabes con sus correspondientes traducciones al inglés. La investigación emplea un marco

teórico poscolonial para analizar el impacto de la dinámica de poder y la imposición cultural en las traducciones al inglés de la cultura egipcia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: teoría poscolonial; traducción cultural; aspectos sociales; cultura egipcia.

1. INTRODUCCIÓN

Midaq Alley, authored by the Egyptian Nobel Prize laureate Naguib Mahfouz, is a literary masterpiece that scrutinises the repercussions of World War II on ordinary characters. The narrative unfolds within the culturally and historically momentous backdrop of Egypt's *Midaq Alley* (Allen 2000). This article offers a thorough examination of the societal repercussions of the conflict, use fabricated dialogues created by Naguib Mahfouz to demonstrate its impact on the individuals in the story. Mahfouz skilfully conveys the wider consequences of the war on civilizations by employing this method, utilising his work as a tool to examine these subjects (Al-Naqqash 1998).

In this essay, Lawrence Venuti's theory of foreignization and domestication (1995) is used as a practical tool to assess the final outcomes of translation from a postcolonial theoretical perspective. The aim of domestication is to standardise the foreign text, while foreignization aims to preserve its cultural distinctiveness. An examination of Venuti's theory, in the context of postcolonial theory, will provide significant insights on the extent to which each translator utilises a methodology that corresponds with the fundamental principles of postcolonial theory. This theory promotes either the process of decolonizing texts or the adoption of a hybrid approach.

Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*, a literary work exploring Egyptian life, has been translated into more than 30 languages. An analysis is conducted on the English translations of the work using a postcolonial perspective in order to ascertain their portrayal of Egyptian culture.

2. ANALYTICAL TECHNIQUES

The study focuses on evaluating three English translations of *Midaq Alley* by analysing the cultural-specific elements at both micro and macro levels. The assessment attempts to determine the techniques used by translators Trevor LeGassick (in TT1 1966 and in TT2 1975) and Humphrey Davies (in TT3 2011) through a comparative-descriptive methodology to investigate and compare the modifications made in their English translations for those cultural items. This comparison is made with two purposes in mind: first, to get insight into the translators' orientation; and second, to explore the possibility of being compatible with postcolonial theory themes in translation.

Moreover, the application of Venuti's theory (1995) of foreignization and domestication enables one to discern the orientation of each translator. This determination of the translator's orientation examines the way in which emphasising the foreignness of a text corresponds with postcolonial theory in the field of translation.

3. SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS NUANCES IN TRANSLATION

This section illustrates some examples where Mahfouz incorporates commonly cultural used terms among Egyptians. Let us examine the tables below to determine the types of methods that were employed in these examples:

.		1	2	3
	<p>ل الشاب ساخرا: عم كامل، قهوة كرشة، الجوزة. الكومي؟!» (1947, 43)</p> <p>AT: «<i>faqal</i> <i>alshaabu sakhira:</i> <i>eama kamil, qahwat</i> <i>karashati, aljawzati.</i> <i>alkumi?!»</i></p>	<p>«His young friend said scornfully: uncle Kamil, Kirsha's coffeehouse, smoking a narguileh» (1966, 39)</p>	<p>«His young friend said scornfully: uncle Kamil, Kirsha's cafe, smoking a water pipe, playing cards!» (1992, 35)</p>	<p>«The other youth responded sarcastically, "Uncle Kamel, the café, the goza, a game of cards?"» (2011, 32)</p>

Table 1. Social Life (Cultural items)

The first example discusses the colloquial usage of the Egyptian phrase «الجوزة/الكومي». First, the Egyptian hookah, colloquially referred to as «Goza», derives its name from its construction using a hollowed-out coconut. This Goza (coconut) has two holes: one for the placement of a stone, and another for a wooden tube through which users inhale the smoke. The smoke is filtered through water contained within the coconut, creating a distinctive and culturally significant smoking apparatus. In TT1 and TT2, LeGassick initially renders this term as «narguileh», opting for a more formal word; yet this choice is identical, it is not historically significant (using a coconut as a hookah). However, in his second translation, he adopts a descriptive approach by describing its functional components as «smoking a water pipe». Nevertheless, this description may obscure its cultural designation as «goza», derived from the primary ingredient (coconut). In TT3, the term «goza» is used to convey the cultural aspect, namely in reference to its usage by the Egyptian people. In TT1, the other cultural term «alkomi» (a name of one group in the game/ *Denari* in Italy), which is a name of a cards game, is excluded, but in TT2 and TT3 it is rendered functionally as «playing cards» and «a game of cards» respectively. This term also denotes a location in Cairo where individuals would gather to indulge in smoking hookah and engage in card games, and I believe that this location derives its name from a figure featured on these cards, so connecting the place with the characteristic of being a gathering spot for individuals to engage in card games is a crucial remark. Therefore, failing to include the name of the game in the translation may result in the loss of its distinctive characteristic (the name of the place and the reason of the naming).

	1	2	3
<p>«العيش يجب الخفة» (40) AT: »akul aleaysh yuhibu alkhifa»</p>	<p>«You must keep active to earn a decent living.» (1966, 37)</p>	<p>«For a decent living, you need a nice quick hand!» (1992, 33)</p>	<p>«you want to eat you need light fingers"—a philosophy that ... (2011, 29) »</p>

Table 2. Social Life (Proverbs)

In the second example, the cultural proverb «اكل العيش يجب الخفة» conveys the idea that in order to secure your life, you must be energetic and punctual. This sentiment seems comparable to the English phrase «the early bird catches the worm». Upon examining the three translations, it becomes evident that the two translators have made certain oversights, particularly in TT2 and TT3. However, TT1 manages to convey the intended meaning accurately, stating «You must keep active to earn a decent living» (1966, 37). Nevertheless, TT2 and TT3 express an unfavourable interpretation of the intended message as «For a decent living, you need a nice quick hand!» (1992, 33) and «if you want to eat you need light fingers» (2011, 29) respectively. In Arab Culture, the terms «quick hand» in TT2 and «light fingers» in TT3 have negative connotations which suggest the idea that to achieve a comfortable lifestyle, one must possess the art of robbery. They are commonly linked to those who are involved in snatching or have light fingers for stealing or pickpocketing. However, while TT1 tried to give a comparable alternative, it remained more loyal to the original significance in the ST compared to TT2 and TT3, which altered the meaning totally.

In conclusion, this section explores the challenges of transferring cultural features to a different culture. It highlights that solely focusing on the semantic content of a statement may not always be enough to fully understand its precise meaning. The meaning of the statement is often dependent on contextual information, which is connected through implicit interactions. Ernst-August Gutt, in his essay «Pragmatic Aspects of Translation: Some Relevance-Theory Observations», featured in Hickey's *The Pragmatics of Translation* (1998, 50), asserts that the translation of literary texts necessitates the translator's familiarity with the cultural milieu surrounding the specific work. This comprehensive understanding is imperative for grasping the original text (ST) and ensuring its accurate rendition in the target text (TT).

	1	2	3
<p>«اتحة ذنبها كبير» (171) AT: »alfatihah dhanabuha kabir»</p>	<p>«Punishment for abusing the <u>Quran</u> is harsh, you know» (1966, 163)</p>	<p>«Punishment for violating the <u>Quran</u> is harsh, you know» (1992, 146)</p>	<p>«It's great sin to go back on your word after you've read the <u>Fatiha</u>» (2011, 134)</p>

Table 3. Religious Life (Religious concept)

This table provides a unique traditional Egyptian cultural idea that is not commonly utilised in other Arab countries. In this instance, Hamida perused «the Fatiha», which is the initial verse in the Quran and is referred to as the «Mother of the Book». This cultural practice serves as a solemn pledge to fulfil irreversible obligations towards any activities, including engagement vows or job promise. This concept bears resemblance to the solemn commitment, commonly known in TC, that is generally regarded as obligatory and may entail a profound sense of duty or responsibility for the individual making the commitment. In TT1 and TT2, the translator conveys this cultural concept by adjusting it to a highly neutral and inclusive phrase «Quran», even though no specific verse in the Quran can be recited as a basis for making a commitment, except for «Al-Fatiha» which is the opening verse of the Quran. In TT3, Davies endeavours to preserve the cultural tradition of reciting the initial verse of the Quran (al-Fatiha). However, this decision appears to be a form of resistance to the TC, but he adds an endnote describing it as the opening of the Quran, often recited to seal a transaction (2011, 277).

.		1	2	3
	«مولودة في ليلة القدر والحسين» (165) AT: <i>mawludat fi laylat Al-Qadar wa Al- Hussain</i>	«My, my, you were certainly born under a lucky star» (1966, 157)	«My, my, you were certainly born under a lucky star» (1992, 141)	«You must have been born on the Night of Power and the Feast of El- Hussein!» (2011, 129)

Table 4. Religious Life (Islamic expression)

In this table, Laylat al-Qadr is a revered night in Islam, regarded as one of the most significant evenings, and it occurs during the final ten days of the holy month of Ramadan. In Egyptian culture, the Night of Al-Qadr (literally translates to: Night of Destiny) holds significant value, which is praised in connection to Night of Hussain. The Night of Hussein is the day when Lady Zainab was born. This event is specifically commemorated in certain areas of Egypt. In this specific instance, Um Hamida holds the belief that Hamida's birth matches the Night of Qadr and Hussain, attributing her good fortune to Alwan's proposal of marriage. In TT1 and TT2, the translator employs a pragmatic strategy in rendering the phrase as «born under a lucky star» in a manner that may be comprehensible by the target audience. However, this approach results in the loss of the cultural essence inherent in the original text. Nevertheless, in his TT3, Davies offers a more precise translation to capture the cultural context of this concept as «Night of Power and the Feast of El-Hussein». He further elaborates in the endnote that it refers to «a night occurring during the holy month of Ramadan...» and El-Hussein is «a venerated figure in Islam», being the grandson of the Prophet (2011, 278-79).

To summarise, the translation of cultural religious materials poses complexities, necessitating translators to manage the intricacies of language, cultural subtleties, and religious settings. Lynne Long (2005) argues that certain cultural and linguistic characteristics unique to the Quran are difficult to translate, posing intriguing challenges for translators. Translators in such instances are required to skillfully navigate

intricate verbal idioms, cultural allusions, and religious overtones in order to accurately deliver the desired meaning while also maintaining a strong connection with the intended recipients.

4. TRANSLATORS' STRANDS

Within the analysis of each translator's main approach, it is necessary to offer some understanding of Venuti's theory of foreignization and domestication. These two concepts can be useful in evaluating the orientation taken by the translators of their translations. Since this study examines the translation of cultural elements in an Arabic novel that reflects Egyptian culture, approaches to translating cultures are commonly categorised as domestication, which focuses on the target language culture, or foreignization, which emphasises the source language culture. Domestication aims to minimise the unfamiliarity of the foreign text, whereas foreignization aims to preserve the distinctive essence of the source language and culture. In his 1998 *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*, Venuti explores the concepts of domestication and foreignization as concepts which relate to cultural differences and describe how a translation can either assimilate a foreign text into the language and culture of the translator or emphasise the differences of the original text. From this standpoint, emphasising and preserving the otherness of a work can fulfil the fundamental principle of postcolonial theory in the context of translation.

This study examines the alterations made by translators to culturally distinctive phrases in Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*. While both LeGassick and Davies undertook the translation of the book, it might be deduced that this article provides a comprehensive explanation of the exact procedures used by LeGassick to make adjustments or exclusions, which can be applied to a wide range of content, including individual words or sentences. LeGassick's versions display significant omissions on the smallest and largest level, particularly in poetic and religious passages. Davies' translation approach is distinguished by its emphasis on the source text, employing a foreignizing strategy as defined by Venuti. Conversely, LeGassick's technique focuses more on the target text and uses a domesticating strategy, as stated by Venuti.

5. CONCLUSION

The theory of postcolonial translation is a tool used in translation studies specifically for texts that address colonial and postcolonial discourses. *Midaq Alley* is considered a postcolonial text due to its portrayal of postcolonial features and characteristics by its author. This novel is translated by two translators, each employing their unique method to convey the original message. The results of this translation process are analysed to identify concepts aligned with postcolonial theory, emphasising the need for decolonization or foreignization of texts.

In conclusion, postcolonial translation theory promotes alternative translation procedures that challenge target language rules to preserve and communicate source material culture. In summary, this chapter examined the translation of Arabic cultural objects into English, focusing on Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Midaq Alley*. Postcolonial

translation theory has been used to analyse translation concepts that preserve cultural characteristics using literal or mixed techniques. The research examined the translation of cultural artefacts to show the difficulties of translating cultural nuances between languages.

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