

Translation of Poetry: A Study of Translatability of Pragmatic and Cultural Elements

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Abstract

Poetry is a genre that states more in a few words because much of it is cultural content that is assumed to be comprehended by the reader(s). This very characteristic of poetry of being rooted in cultural ethos makes its translation complex and even "untranslatable." Imr-ul-Qais's *Muallaqa* is an Arabic classic which has been a symbol of the shared Arab identity, values, and magnanimity. In addition to its unsurpassed poetic brilliance, it is an epitome of the culture of the pre-Islamic Arab world. There are many translations of this masterpiece into English, though each is unique in terms of interpretations, liberties, and constraints. This study examines three prominent translations of Imr-ul-Qais's *Muallaqa* by Arberry, Johnson, and Mumayiz with reference to Venuti's (1995) dichotomy of domestication and foreignization. The aim is to identify translators' strategies in tackling the translational challenges, as well as the implications thereof, in order to bridge the linguistic and cultural divide as well as if and what is the nature of the loss of meaning in the process. Results showed that Arberry aims for a poetic rendition in blank verse, focusing on semantic and syntactic fidelity rather than rhyme and meter. Johnson employed transposition and modulation, resulting in a more prosaic translation that lacks the Arabic ethos. Both translators leaned towards domestication, prioritizing English comprehension over retaining the original sentiment. Mumayiz, a native speaker of Arabic, provides a more rhythmic translation, with greater effort to provide English readers with insights into the original text, hence leaned more on foreignization than domestication.

Keywords: Arabic poetry, domestication, foreignization, Imr-ul-Qais, untranslatability

1. Introduction

Translating poetry has always been a controversial issue, even to the point that Jakobson subsumes it under untranslatability modules (Jakobson, 1959; Morini, 2013). Yet the philosophical, linguistic and semiotic value of poetry as a symbol of culture is paramount. This is exemplified in Imr-ul-Qais's *Muallaqa* which is affectionately described by Arabs as an epitome of *diwan alarab* or "the record / meeting hall of Arabs" as it reflects their collective identity and shared values. This pre-Islamic text has been translated several times into English and yet its unique linguistic features and historical grounding have been limiting factors for translators. This has raised the debate for the proper strategies that a translator needs to adopt to present this text to English language readers. Several studies have attempted to shed light on the translation of classical Arabic poetry (Lahiani et al, 2023; Lahiani, 2022, 2008; Mohammed, 2018; Montgomery, 1986; Stetkevych, 1993). However, none of them have attempted to look at the poems from the angle of the translator's strategy of whether to focus on the source text quality retention or target text reader's ease of understanding. In contrast to previous studies, and using Venuti's (1995) discourse on domestication and foreignization, none of the previous studies compare and/or contrast three translations of the same poem. On the contrary, this study analyzes the pragmatic and cultural elements of the poem across the three translations.

In an attempt to create a window into pre-Islamic Arabic society, or even to duplicate pre-Islamic Arabic life into English, many people have tried their hand at translating Arabic Jahiliyah poetry (Arberry, 1957; Johnson, 1894; Jones, 1881). There are also those who tried, from an Arab perspective, to help foreign readers appreciate Arabic poetry (Mumayiz, 2002). While Jakobson (1959) recognizes poetry as one of the untranslatables, poetic messages do pass from one culture to another. The question remains on how much gain or loss takes place. Imr-ul-Qais is a poet whose poetry, in Bateson's (1970) words, reflects "abruptness' [that] has always been very puzzling to Western critics". It is a poem abundant in emphasis that reflects "metaphysical concepts through emblem, symbol" (Sumi, 2003), hence embedded with existential and cultural values. Venuti (1995) introduces us to the concepts of domestication and foreignization: two polar strategies that the translator oscillates between, in an attempt to preserve one text culture at the expense of the other. This research aims to investigate how the aforementioned translators sailed with the task of Imr-ul-Qais' *Muallaqa*, given its richness and profoundness.

Statement of the problem

Despite the numerous translations of Imr-ul-Qais's *Muallaqa*, there is a lack of comprehensive comparative studies that analyze these translations under established translational theories, in this study, that of Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignization. This study holds significance in the realm of translation studies, specifically in the context of classical Arabic poetry. *Muallaqa* is a seminal work

from the pre-Islamic Arab world and analyzing its three different translations will bring out the peculiarities of poetry translation and translation strategies used to overcome the barriers.

Research questions

1. How do the translations of Arberry, Johnson, and Mumayiz differ in their approach to Imr-ul-Qais's *Muallaqa*?
2. In what ways do Venuti's concepts of foreignization and domestication manifest in these translations?
3. What challenges are inherent in translating classical Arabic poetry, particularly a work as historically and culturally significant as *Muallaqa*?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Background

Venuti (1995) emphasizes that translators should view the translation process through the lens of culture, which distorts the cultural norms of the source language. It is the responsibility of the translator to communicate these norms, maintaining their significance and their foreign essence in the target-language text. Each phase in the translation process, including the choice of foreign texts, the application of translation strategies, and the scrutiny and understanding of translations, is influenced by the varied cultural values present in the target language.

Venuti (1995) argues that the field of English-language translation is mostly inclined towards a submissive and assimilating approach, characterized by a smooth domestication. He strongly criticizes translators who, in an effort to minimize the foreignness of the target text, reduce foreign cultural norms to align with the values of the target language. According to him, the domestication strategy unduly eliminates cultural values, resulting in a text that appears as though it was originally written in the target language and adheres to the cultural norms of the target reader. Venuti fervently promotes the foreignization strategy, viewing it as a method that applies "ethnodeviant pressure on [target-language cultural] values" to emphasize the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text, taking the reader to a foreign context. Consequently, he contends that a satisfactory translation should accentuate the foreign nature of the source text. Rather than allowing the dominant target culture to assimilate the distinctions of the source culture, a translation should signal these differences.

2.2 Translating Poetry

Travelling across spatiotemporal barriers is possible through translation. If the translation is of poetry as well as literature, it becomes more complicated (Gilmour & Steinitz, 2017). As is well known, poetic language differs from prose in two ways: first, it employs poetic deviations, which are employed in addition to metre and rhythm. Poets who are driven by a cause often have a personal lexicon. Any translator finds this to be a challenging decision because the seeming ease of communication is frequently misleading (Robinson, 2019). A translator needs to be proficient in both languages and their respective cultures in order to translate the original work effectively. Information, scientific understanding, and enjoyment are the reasons behind translation. The translation of literature satisfies this final goal (Grossman, 2010). A paradoxical place among the leagues of other branches of study has been acquired by literary translation. While translating was originally regarded as a servile occupation and translators were not granted the rank of artists, today it is recognised as a creative endeavour on par with original works (Kotze, 2019). This is when a translator's job gets challenging. A translator might miss the essence if s/he tries to catch the linguistic reciprocals, and s/he might lose some precise meaning if s/he tries to achieve the essence.

Nevertheless, pragmatics is the actual discipline that needs to be learned. Translating poetry requires the translator to possess both lexical and pragmatic skills. For this reason, a translator translating poetry must possess both lexical and pragmatic competence, as pragmatics is the actual discipline that must be acquired prior to beginning a literary translation of a poet (Catford, 1965). There are moments when human emotions are universal, making it the simplest aspect of writing for translators into different languages. The commonality of human emotions serves as the explanation once more (Izard, 2013). Poetry's vocabulary is hard to translate since it can't express the beauty this divergence creates. This divergence has a direct connection to the poet's own vocabulary. Subjectivity is ingrained in the universe s/he creates in his/her work most of the time (Lin, 2007). This enhances the produced object's context. Because they are such sensitive artists, poets are unable to stay isolated from their environment. The original can be best appreciated in translation if we are aware of the context, even though it is a great qualification of any literary work of art if it endures and becomes universal via gaining objectivity (Blasing, 2009), particularly when it comes to poets who have a goal or intention hidden under the subtlety of their artistic expression.

2.3 Difficulty of Translating Poetry

The most difficult topic of translation, posing a challenge to interpreters and translation studies experts alike, is translating poetry. Poetry translation has long been discussed, with many arguments for and against it as well as dichotomous reasoning regarding its feasibility or inability (Francis, 2006). This is because poetry has a high cultural status and translating its conventional rhyme, rhythmic frameworks, and figurative language takes time, effort, and creativity. Dastjerdi et al. (2008) reflect upon that in their analysis of a Persian poem by current Iranian poet Garmaroodi (1984) and its English translation at both the linguistic and extra-linguistic levels.

Poetry translations should essentially be conceptual translations since poems are usually rich in emotive and artistic qualities. When translating poetry, the translator could run into issues with language, literature, visual appeal, and social and cultural norms. The ambiguous syntactic structure and collocation are among the linguistic issues (Alowedi & Al-Ahdal, 2023; Nida & Taber, 1974). Sound,

figurative language, and poetic form are all connected to literary and artistic issues (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2021). However, when a translator translates statements that involve any of the four main cultural categories — ideas, environmentalism, actions, and products — translation then delves into sociocultural issues (Hariyanto, 2003).

Jiang (2023) focuses on examining the translation strategies employed by Xu Yuanchong in translating Chinese classical poetry, specifically selected lyrics from Xu Yuanchong's Chinese-English Translation of 300 Chinese Tang and Song Lyrics. Xu Yuanchong is known for emphasizing the exquisite qualities of message, form, and music in his translations, which significantly enhanced the translatability of traditional Chinese poetry through his innovative translation approach. By emphasizing functional equivalence and aesthetic aspirations in his translations, Xu Yuanchong's technique can serve as a valuable guide for translating medieval Chinese poems and songs, addressing potential semantic meaning loss due to the unique style and literary form of poetry.

Anjum (2016) attempted to analyze the challenges associated with translating representational poetry. The research aimed to assess the accuracy of translations by different translators in capturing the poet's meaning lexically and thematically, drawing on Zohar and Toury's polysystem theory. The study revealed that not all poems are difficult to interpret; rather, highly metaphorical or introspective forms pose challenges without the appropriate socio-pragmatic understanding.

Similarly, Hee et al. (2022) explored artistic conceptions in Chinese poetry beyond literal words, using Vinay and Darbelnet's methodology. It analyzed translatability, focusing on five poems, emphasizing "equivalence" in translation strategies. Cultural context impacted translation challenges, highlighting footnotes' role in preserving artistic intent. The study emphasized maintaining artistic ideas in Chinese poetry translations into English.

Earlier, Yeh (2011) examined English versions of contemporary Chinese poetry, highlighting geopolitical and social implications. Part II proposes "elective affinity" as a key factor in translatability, illustrated through interactions between Chinese and Anglo-American poets/translators.

Hariyanto (2003) outlined fundamental ideas for resolving linguistic, literary, aesthetic, and sociocultural issues in translating poems. Man and Lee (2019) explored power dynamics and cultural identities in modern Chinese poetry from China, Taiwan, and Malaysia, highlighting influences and cultural experimentation within the genre.

3. Methods

The study aims to work on two axes: 1) the issues related to the translation of poetry, especially Arabic poetry; 2) the concepts of domestication and foreignization, with specific focus on Arabic poetry. Within these two axes, excerpts from the translations of the poem by Arberry, Johnson, and Mumayiz were analyzed. Three translations, two by English speakers viz., Arberry and Johnson, and one by Mumayiz, an Arabic speaker. The increasing diversity in every society has exposed it to a multitude of foreign cultures and their artistic expressions. However, in recent years, the influence of the west has waned, making room for literatures from the Middle and Far East. While this shift brings in fresh perspectives, it is not always straightforward for these cultures especially those that have so far remained more or less 'closed' such as that of Arabic, to connect with a Western audience. Challenges such as language barriers, unfamiliarity with Arabic society, and various cultural nuances impede easy access and interest. This is particularly evident in the case of early Arabic literature.

"The Mu'allaqat" or "The Hanging Poems" considered one of the most significant poetic works from pre-Islamic Arabia, are an example of this. These odes represent a pinnacle in a tradition spanning six centuries (from the first to the sixth century AD). They intricately depict the early Arabic life of bedouin communities, offering a detailed glimpse into their existence. Despite being widely read, praised, and studied in Arabic schools and universities, these poetic works face hurdles in finding resonance and appreciation among Western audiences. For these very characteristics, their translation is a task that comes with great responsibilities as the original work is a treasure trove of pre-Islamic Arabia. In the following sections, we compare the translation of some verses by the three translators in an attempt to evaluate the differences in their approaches and the peculiar challenges that translation of a historical work demands. In short, these analyses answer the research questions.

4. Results and Discussion

To highlight the points made in this study, some lines are selected and discussed in a compare-and-contrast mode. These can serve as evidence of how the translators approached the translation of this poem.

Arberry 1957

*I came, and already she'd stripped off her garments for sleep
beside the tent-flap, all but a single flimsy slip;
and she cried, 'God's oath, man, you won't get away with this!
The folly's not left you yet; I see you're as feckless as ever.'*

Johnson (1917)

*Then she said to me, "I swear by God, you have no excuse for your wild life;
I can not expect that your erring habits will ever be removed from your nature."*

Analysis: Both translations convey a similar narrative of the scene where the speaker arrives and finds Unaizah preparing for bed.

Though both the translations retain the original meaning of the lines, the choice of words differ with Arberry going for the less direct, almost passive connotation in "removed" which agrees more with the Arabic style than Johnson's loaded, too direct, and almost unpoetic "eradicated". The original essence is thus, captured better in Arberry's translation. There are also differences in the structuring and order of the verse in the two versions. In translating the original, Johnson has followed the non-Arabic speaker's cultural ethos more closely, thus engaging in domestication to a larger extent especially with the use of lexis such as "swear" and "habits". He leaves little to the reader's imagination, and the syntax is flatter and prosaic. The pragmatic content or implicature '*God's oath, man, you won't get away with this*' shows this clearly.

Arberry

*Friend, do you see yonder lightning? Look, there goes its glitter
flashing like two hands now in the heaped-up, crowned stormcloud.*

Johnson

*But come, my friends, as we stand here mourning, do you see the lightning?
See its glittering, like the flash of two moving hands, amid the thick gathering clouds.*

Analysis: Both Arberry and Johnson convey the same basic idea of observing lightning in the distance.

In both cases, the translations capture the essence of the original passage but present it with some stylistic nuances. The stylistic differences between the two translations can be observed in several aspects, including word choices, phrasing, and overall tone. In verb choice, Arberry uses "perceive" to describe the act of seeing the lightning, suggesting a more intentional or thoughtful observation, with an almost philosophical touch to the act of beholding. Johnson uses the more straightforward "see," which is a simpler and more direct verb. Arabic expression is typically characterized by a blunted, roundabout, even verbose way of stating, and in this sense, Arberry's translation comes closer to capturing the original ethos, upholding Venuti's principle of maintaining "the lens of culture" in translation, the onus for which lies with the translator. This is again reflected in the descriptive language use by the translators, Arberry using the clearly poetic "gleam races," implying a swift and dynamic motion, while Johnson going for the more western expression, "sparkle is flickering," which conveys a sense of intermittent and shimmering movement. The cultural equivalence or the studies avoidance of it is most visible in Arberry's protagonist addressing his companions as "my comrades," creating a sense of camaraderie, shared experience, and tribe feeling which fits in well with the time when the original composition belongs, rather than Johnson's "my friends," maintaining a friendly tone but one which is rather out of place in the cultural context of Arabia. Sentence structure and rhythm in both the translations is very different: Arberry clearly displays a partiality for transferring the sentiment quite unadulterated to the English version, whereas Johnson chooses the direct translation to the detriment of the cultural connotation. In the adjectives and adjective clauses too, Arberry's "accumulated, crowned storm cloud" is a cultural allusion to the riches of Arabia in contrast to Johnson's more direct "thickening clouds." Both convey the idea of a storm cloud, but the choice of adjectives differs. Overall, the stylistic differences between the translations lie in the nuances of word choices, descriptive language, addressing the audience, phrasing, and overall expression. Both translations effectively convey the core meaning of the original passage but do so with distinct stylistic choices.

Arberry

*In the morning the songbirds all along the broad valley
quaffed the choicest of sweet wines rich with spices;
the wild beasts at evening drowned in the furthest reaches
of the wide watercourse lay like drawn bulbs of wild onion.*

Johnson

*As though the little birds of the valley of Jiwaa awakened in the morning
And burst forth in song after a morning draught of old, pure, spiced wine.
As though all the wild beasts had been covered with sand and mud, like the onion's root-bulbs.
They were drowned and lost in the depths of the desert at evening.*

Analysis: In these translations the overall picturization is that of sunrise with birds singing and wild creatures there in a broad valley. The choice of words and phrasing differs between the translations, offering slight variations in the expression of the scene. The use of "finest" by Arberry is closer to the description of wine in Arab culture to describe the sweet wines, emphasizing their quality than Johnson's "exquisite" which is more 'western' in its implication. In phrasing and word choices, there is a lyrical quality to Arberry's "come evening" to introduce the time when the wild creatures are submerged, creating a smooth transition. Johnson employs the phrase "At evening" for the same purpose, maintaining a similar but slightly different, prosaic, flatter flow. Arberry describes the wild creatures as "resembling pulled bulbs of wild onions," providing a visual image with a specific simile. Johnson uses the phrase "lay akin to pulled bulbs of wild onion," expressing a similar idea but with a slightly different structure. Synonyms too are employed differently in both the translations, such as "unadulterated" in Arberry and "aged" in Johnson to describe the wine, showcasing nuanced choices in vocabulary.

Mumayiz

When belles arise, their musk so sweet and true

Johnson

Fair were they also, diffusing the odor of musk as they moved

Analysis: Comparing the translations of Mumayiz and Johnson reveals another aspect of the task. For example, Mumayiz's *When belles arise, their musk so sweet and true* versus Johnson's *Fair were they also, diffusing the odor of musk as they moved*, differ at the pragmatic level as the former conveys the connotations of purity and beauty associated with musk which was used in many ancient religious and spiritual rituals, hence "sweet and true", an intended meaning lost in the latter's "odor of musk" which fails to touch the intended end of the spectrum of meanings. Rhetoric is the 'flesh and blood' of the Arabic language and helps maintain its rich tribal aura, but in the later translation which is factually correct, the pragmatic meaning that the overstatement alone could have conveyed, is lost.

Johnson

Thus the tears flowed down on my breast, remembering days of love

Mumayiz

My streaming tears the pangs of love had felt

Arberry

eyes overflowed with tears

Analysis: Hyperbole, one of the pragmatic literary devices is a characteristic of Arabic poetry. This effect was lost in the translations of Johnson and Arberry but easily captured in Mumayiz's "pangs of love" in the comparisons. This is repeated in Mumayiz's *When, from behind, wailed loud her tiny tot*, a verse which Arberry translated as "whimpered".

Johnson

There was another day when I walked with her behind the sandhills

Mumayiz

Over a dune, me she once resisted

Analysis: The sense of victory that Mumayiz captures which in turn, paints the picture of the poet as a true 'wandering king' is nowhere to be seen in the flat and matter-of-fact translation of Johnson which totally fails to capture the intended meaning of the poet's success in 'conquering' many a woman.

Venuti (1988) states that "Domestication and foreignization deal with 'the question of how much a translation assimilates a foreign text to the translating language and culture, and how much it rather signals the differences of that text'". Though riddled with pitfalls, translators have ventured time and again into the potent field of translating poetry from Arabic to English in an attempt to capture the essence and take the unique culture and life of the classical Arab world to the west. Klasova (2023) aptly comments that "the study of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry helps to situate Arabia in the orbit of Late Antiquity". Imr-ul-Qais's *Muallaqa* is one such manifestation of cultural, historical, and linguistic significances, which has spurred translators to make strategic choices that go beyond mere lexical transference, despite whimsical charges of disunity in the poem caused by successive translators and commentators (Redhouse, 1881, cited in Farrin, 2011, p. 24). Jakobson (1995), in his seminal work, even categorized certain poetic translations under the realm of "untranslatability." Such concerns have been further elaborated by scholars like Venuti (1995), who presented the contrasting strategies of domestication, wherein the foreign text is adapted to fit the target culture, and foreignization, which retains the foreignness, urging readers to stretch their cultural understanding. Translation of classical Arab poetry has presented unique challenges to translators due to its linguistic intricacies and cultural embeddings, many of which are now extant. Imr-ul-Qais's *Muallaqa* has been approached differently by translators in modern times. Two of these translations are of particular interest here as they present the versions of western translators, each reflecting their understanding and strategic choices. However, a comprehensive analysis comparing these translations, especially under the lens of foreignization and domestication, has so far been scant.

5. Conclusion

In his translation, Arberry endeavored, on one hand, to cultivate an authentic poetic rendition embodied in blank verse, typically devoid of rhyme yet maintaining a consistent meter. In doing so, he aimed to adhere to established English poetic conventions. It is clear that his translation did not aim to uphold the rhyme and meter of the source text. Arberry's rendition seems more focused on safeguarding the semantic and syntactic aspects of the original rather than preserving the unbroken structure and overall form of the poem. Yet, his translation is accurate and fluent. In his work "The Seven Odes," Arberry mentions that it is improbable to make linguistic discoveries that would significantly alter the traditional understanding of ancient Arabic poetry. Imr al-Qays and similar poets use a natural and sometimes colloquial language. In his translations, he aimed to address the challenge of idiomatic equivalence in this manner, resulting in enhanced vigor and clarity.

Furthermore, Johnson, on the other hand, opts for transposition (a shift from one grammatical category to another, while still preserving the meaning) and modulation (a change of perspective, adjusting what has been written in order to express the same idea and preserve the meaning). As a result, his translation of Imr-ul-Qais's *Muallaqa* appears flatter and prosaic, but nonetheless, not deficient if read as an English rather than a (translated) Arabic poem. In short, it fails to capture the Arabic ethos. Thus, to answer the question of

foreignization (or domestication) in translation of poetry, both Arberry and Johnson have foreignized Imr-ul-Qais's *Muallaqa* which betrays primacy for the English-speaker's comprehension than a desire to maintain the original sentiment. In doing so, they violate what Venuti propounds as the translator's duty: *It is the responsibility of the translator to communicate these norms, maintaining their significance and their foreign essence in the target-language text.*

Finally, being an Arab himself and immersed in Arab culture, Mumayiz sought in his translation to convey to the English reader what he thought this reader would want to know of the meanings and cultural symbols embedded in the poem. Rather than translating it in blank verse, he also ventured to translate it in rhyming couplets, which despite its lure, created many hurdles and hence, twists in the translated text, not found in the original text. In this sense, Mumayiz preferred to foreignize the translated text.

6. Recommendations

The study reveals the intricacies of translating Imr-ul-Qais' *Muallaqa*, identifying specific translational strategies adopted by Arberry, Johnson, and Mumayiz. Furthermore, it sheds light on the overarching challenges faced by translators and the balance between foreignization and domestication in such endeavors in the light of Venuti's theory. These observations can become a useful tool for translators, scholars and critics, and most importantly, for the students of translation programs.

7. Limitations

Despite the existence of many translations of the same poem, only three translations are taken into consideration – i.e. Arberry, Johnson, and Mumayiz. The focus was limited to the investigation of the strategies deployed by the translators, and the presence of foreignization (or domestication) in these attempts.

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Authors contributions

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