

**Cross- Cultural Difficulties in Translating
Al- Hakim's Sign El- Umr (The prison of life) into English**

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This is an attempt to study the difficulties in translation practice of Arabic into English, Which lead to semantic distortions as a result of misreading written Arabic. The idea that translators have in mind on translating Arabic "as a modern language capable of analysis in the way modern linguistics has dealt with modern European Languages" is erroneous as Enani (2000:5) alludes to, explaining that "Arabic is far from being such language. "To consider modern standard Arabic the only version of written Arabic is a miscomprehension of Arabic. Enani (2000:5) tries to fill a gap in the approach to the translation of Arabic texts and stresses that "the spoken variety of Arabic", "the written variety which is ... (MSA)" and "another variety of Arabic , namely archaic, the language which is still alive in our tradition " have to be studied and analyzed together as they spring from the same culture.

Tewfik El- Hakim aimed at using as Enani states a "third language" between Egyptian Arabic and MSA. He used this language in his plays and novels as he tends to be realistic in providing real dialogues. Since he writes for Arabs and not for Egyptians only, he chooses to use a language that links and opens channels between spoken Egyptian Arabic and the MSA and means the same thing to all Arabs. Tewfik El- Hakim chooses words that their last letters are not followed by vowels in Egyptian Arabic and with the signs of declension has the same meaning in MSA. These links are described by Enani (2000:9) as "vital links" between the spoken and written varieties of Arabic. Thus Arabic – English bilinguals move freely and easily from one variety of Arabic to the other. They can translate Egyptian word into another word of the same meaning in MSA and on speaking, they translate vice – versa.

El- Hakim's work Sign El- Umr is translated as the prison of life. The title of El- Hakim's quasi-novel is used in spoken and written Arabic (Umr) in Arabic means a variety of things. The meaning of Umr as given from Hans Wehr: life (1) , or duration of life (2), life span (3), life time (4), age (of a person) (5). It is very important to understand the sense or ground that El- Hakim has in mind in choosing the words of the title. The title is composed of two words "sign El- Umr" : "Sign" is translated in Hans Whereas prison (1) or jail (2). But El- Hakim tries to explain his title through further sentences at the introductory page to his work: "My hope is greater than my effort. My effort is greater than my talent. MY talent is the prisoner of my nature. But I resist".

El- Hakim on writing his autobiography realizes that he is torn between the visions, the aspirations of his soul and the limitations of the abilities of the body.

He means that life on earth is a prison house for the glory and the vision of the soul that gradually decline with the passing of time when moving towards manhood.

Tewfik El- Hakim divided his book into phases according to the span of life, beginning with birth moving to childhood, youth and early manhood. The first phase has to do with his childhood in which he described the light, the power he used to have while he was a child and to which he could not give a scientific explanation. For it was a spiritual power. Such power disappeared gradually when he moved towards youth. Thus the sense of the title can be seen from the point that life on earth is a prison house for the soul. The prison house gives the title a metaphorical dimension for a metaphorical autobiography.

Cross- cultural difficulties in translating from Arabic occur when the translator does not realize what Jeanette Atiya (1990) – in her modification of New mark's theory – calls "an area of overlap" between semantic and communicative translation and what Enani (1996: 17) calls "a comparative moment ... where the translator opts for a word, a construction, an idiom which must refer the reader to his or her own literary tradition. "There is also "the interpretive element" that Enani (1988: 12) stresses its importance for translator.

This paper discusses these difficulties that face English – Arabic bilinguals with translation pursuits. English – Arabic translators who do not realize the importance of the "interpretive element", create a gap of misreading the culture of SL, when English readers with foreign literary interest, read the work.

The paper studies a number of extracts taken from El- Hakim's Arabic novel Sign El- Umr (The prison of life) translated into English by Pierre Cachia. The problematic feature of translation is that the translator for his being a native speaker of the TL does not reach the ground or the sense of the author. There are sections in which the translation distorts the meaning completely. Pierre Cachia (1992: 15) translates "مَهْر" into payment and "صداق" into bride price, "The aspiring groom's family, however, did not offer a respectable nuptial payment. "The translator used "payment" whereas dowry gives the meaning of "مَهْر". The translator's note at the end of the book explains "payment" for the English reader as part of the Islamic marriage contract. This description distorts the religious implication of Islamic marriage. There is incongruity in translating it. The Quran describes it, "and give unto them their portions" (النساء 25) (واتوهن) (النساء 4) "and give unto the women, whom ye marry free gift of their marriage portion" (النساء 4) (وآتوا النساء صدقاتهن). In choosing portion for "أجور" and "صدقاتهن" give the meaning of gift or dowry but not payment nor bride price. The cultural interpretation cannot be separated from the Quran. That is what Enani (1996: 25), calls "the culture of a language difficult to separate from the Quran, which casts a giant shadow over our entire tradition".

The Egyptian Arabic expression "turab el- flus" does not mean dust money as the translator gives the literal meaning. The figurative meaning is what referred to and that is the dowry is less than was expected. The interpretive element does not exist in his translation, thus, semantic distortion occurs when giving a completely different meaning of the word. English – Arabic bilingual who does not recognize the vital links between Egyptian Arabic and MSA and take them as one language, fails to realize "the area of overlap" between semantic and communicative translation. In English "dust money is a metaphor that stresses in particular the complex use of the dust or dirt money symbolism. Dust or dirt money symbolism was part of Dickens social criticism in his novel *Our Mutual Friend*. Thus turab el- flus "and dust money are completely different.

For "turab el- flus" is a colloquial idiom.

There are examples of translating literally using words that mislead the reader and give a meaning different from the intended when he translates:

"خرجت من مدرسة الحقوق، وحصلت على الشهادة النهائية في علم الحقوق ليسانسيه" (سجن العمر، ص 47).

Literally as, "I left school of Law, having obtained the final qualification – the license – in the science of law. "Here" "خرجت" means graduated not left, "الشهادة النهائية" means the academic degree not the final qualification, and the French "license" –which is used in Egyptian Arabic– means Bachelor of Law (BL). I think it would better be translated as : "Being a graduate of the School of Law, I obtained the academic degree, BL "or" I graduated from the School of Law".

Translators who translate Arabic texts without having a cultural approach to interpret the implications of phrases and expressions of a language deeply rooted in tradition produce an incomplete, distorted translation. English – Arabic bilingual with translation pursuits has to compare between his or her literary and cultural tradition and the literary and cultural traditions of the translated text. This is what Enani (2000: 7) stresses as the "links between translation, as a cultural exercise, and comparative literature".

Pierre Cachia in translating "Sign El- Umr" creates a gap resulting from ignoring the cultural approach. Misreading and miscomprehension of words, phrases and expressions can be found in many pages. A translator is not only an accurate bilingual speaker but an able and honest interpreter of the cultural and traditions of the SL. Here are examples of such translations:

"والله لأقطع لسانها بهذا المقص الذي في يدك" (سجن العمر، ص 54).

"By God, I would cut her tongue with those scissors in your hand! (32). The meaning of "والله" is not "by God", "I assure you" or "positively" give the meaning in English. But the translator has to interpret the cultural implication of the oath as it is a "colloquial idiom" related deeply to our religious tradition. Moreover God does not have the meaning "Allah" has, the two words are rhetorically different, God has to be preceded by "the" but Allah has the definite article "Al" as a

part of the word and cannot be separated from it. "God" can be for numerous gods but Allah refers to the creator of the universe.

The problem is that the translation produces misunderstanding from the part of English reading as result of misreading the text:

"وحضرت والدتي تحملني بين ذراعيها، ووقف بجوارها والدي يهمس في أذنها أن تكذب ما نقل عنها" (سجن العمر، ص 54).

"My mother entered with me in her arms, and her husband stood next to her, whispering in her ear that she should give the lie to what had been reported".

The problem is that words are used erroneously, "والدي" means my father" and not "her husband does not mean he is the father of the narrator. It can imply "step- father".

The central problem of translating Arabic is to know the link between the spoken and written varieties of Arabic, in other words, Egyptian Arabic and MSA. Some words and expressions of an Egyptian Arabic are used in El- Hakim's work as a part of this midway language, a language between Egyptian Arabic and MSA.

"اليوم الوحيد الذي كنا نشعر فيه بجديد هو يوم العيد، الكبير أو الصغير، فقد كنا نتلقى فيه خمسة قروش "عيدية" كنت أنا اكتفي باللعب بها طوال أيام العيد، ثم أردتها إلى أهلي دون أن أنفقها"....(ص73).

The only days about which we sensed

Something new were the days of the

Major and minor Feasts, for we used

To get five piasters as a special present

For my part, I was content to play with the coins during the days of the feast, and then return them to my parents unspent. (47)

The translation of "العيد الكبير" and "العيد الصغير" came literally as the expression is used in Egyptian Arabic while they are "عيد الأضحى" and "عيد الفطر" in MSA. The full entry from Hans Wehr is :

"Id al- a". The Feast of Immolation (1), or Greater

Bairam (2), celebrated on the 10 th of Zu Ihijja, yaum al- a. The Day of Immolation (3).

"Id al- a". Feast of the breaking the Ramadan Fast (1), or Lesser Bairam (2), celebrated on the 1 st of Shawwal.

"Idiya" gift (1), present given on the occasion of a feast.

The meaning of "idiya" is a feast's present not a special present.

In different parts of the translation of El- Hakim's work, words are translated erroneously though there are words that have the same meaning in English " عصافير " is translated "birds" where as "sparrows" gives the meaning. (ص 83) " يتلو القرآن " is translated "chanting the Scriptures" (54), "chanting" does not give the meaning of reciting. Reciting is the suitable word and it can be "reciting the Quran" not "scriptures".

Sometimes, the translator skips sentences without translation:

"إن عدد الذين كانوا يقرضون الشعر في الحركة الوطنية من مطربشين ومعممين وطلاب في الأزهر ودار العلوم والمدارس العليا والمعاهد الدينية لم يكن يعد ولا يحصى ما من شاب وقتئذ لم يدبج القصائد في حب الوطن وربما في غيره أيضاً..ما الذي أفعدني أنا؟ ليس عندي سوى تحليل واحد هو أن الشاب يلجأ إلى الشعر تلبية لنداء الفن في أعماقه..فبعض النفوس التي يستنقظ فيها شيطان الفن تحاول أن تجد له مخرجاً وثياباً". (ص 162)

There was scarcely a young man then

Who did not compose odes on love of

Motherland, and perhaps other loves as

Well. What was it that held me back?

I have only one explanation. It is a young

Man resorts to poetry in response to the

Call of art in his depths for souls in

Which the demon of art awakes try to find.

An outlet and a garb. (110)

The first sentence is not translated. I now give a translation of it:

The number of students- wearing fezzes (those who wore fezzes were members of the educated middle class), turbans and students of Al- Azhar, Faculty of Dar el- Uloum, Higher and Secondary schools, religious institutes- who composed poetry at the Revolution in 1919 was innumerable.

The meaning of " شيطان الفن " is the "muses" not the "demon of art" that produces a literal one and is not used in English.

Tewfik El- Hakim mentions the history of writing one of his remarkable novels:

""وكنت أنا وقتئذ في فرنسا أكتب عودة الروح...كان الأمر إذن ولم يزل فيما يتعلق بكتابتي للرواية والقصة تطوعاً قومياً وفنياً أقوم به كلما شعرت أن هناك حاجة إلى الإسهام بجهد، وأن الواجب يدعو إلى المحاولة" (ص 164).

I was myself at the time in France writing The Return of the Spirit.

For me to turn to the novel or the short story was- and has remained- a matter of voluntary national and artistic service. I undertake it whenever I feel there is a need for a contributory effort, that duty calls for an endeavor. (111- 112)

The Return of the Spirit is an erroneous translation of "عودة الروح" for the translator has to be aware of the various senses of the title. Al- Hakim has in mind the old spirit of the pharaohs, the forefathers of the Egyptians, he also means the power of the people to restore their unifying spirit which re- appeared during the Revolution in 1919. Restoration gives the meaning of "عودة" and "الروح" is used to imply a variety of things – awareness, vision, spirit, glory or unifying power. Having put these implications down, I give the full entry from Hans Wehr:

"روح" ruh. Breath of life (1) or, soul (2), spirit (3) (In all senses). It should be The Restoration of Awareness.

Even in his explanatory notes, the translator aims to explain and uncover the mystery of some words or expressions, in doing so, he does not interpret or give an accurate translation: he translates "Kaaba in Mecca" as "shrine in Mecca". Shrine is used to mean Al- Quds (Jerusalem). When he tries to explain "الشهادتين" known as "basic creed" (54), in his note, "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is Apostle of God". Allah has to be used instead of God and Muhammad is the messenger and prophet of Allah not "Apostle of God". Apostle means the disciple or follower of Jesus Christ. This translation distorts the meaning.

This essay sheds light on the problematic features and the cross- cultural difficulties that face English – Arabic bilinguals. Incongruity appears when they translate Arabic texts without relating them to the culture which is deeply rooted in "our tradition and especially in the Muslim scriptures as Enani (2000: 5) assures. Pierre Cachia's translation of Sign El- Umr provides a ground for tracing the incongruity in translating Arabic texts not giving a thorough, accurate and honest interpretation of its culture.

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