

# Culture in Literary Translation between Submission and Resistance Translating Tahar Wattar's Cultural Connotations in his Novel "The Earthquake"

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## Abstract

Algerian literature, as all other literatures in the world, has its own characteristics in expressing cultural and societal values typical to the author's own habitus and which may be deemed difficult to grasp and translate. For instance, in Tahar Wattar's novel "al-Zilzal" (The Earthquake) there are many religious and cultural references that are typical to the Algerian society in terms of use although at the denotational level they seem universal in the Arab culture and even familiar to other cultures if we consider the universal dimension of Islam itself. This cultural references were meant by the author to demarcate modern Algerian novel and dissociate it from the French language and culture. Thus, the experience of the translator, especially in literature, is manifold, and the translator has to delve in the spirit of the text rendered by its author culturally specific, and decide on appropriate strategies accordingly.

In this piece of paper, we are trying to shed light on William Granara's translation of al-zilzal in this respect.

**Keywords** : cultural values ; Algerian literature; literary discourse; translation strategies; cultural identity.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Culture is inherent in language and constitutes a cornerstone in the translation of literature. When translating literature, we are, in fact, interested in knowing the other, their culture, their world-view, their feelings, their history and their life in general. All these facets of knowledge

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are inherent in culture that best defines otherness. A better term for otherness as advanced by Bruti et al (2014, p.233) is "ethnicity" which "acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual". This ethnicity involves a fighting struggle on the part of the writer to gain ground and representation that escape alienation and gain affirmation, and on the part of the translator to detach himself from subjectivity and over-generalization and leave room to hospitality. Derrida (1985:100) in Claramonte (2014, p. 248) emphasizes the vital role of translation, which, he says:

is no more a linguistic operation that consists in transporting meaning from language to another...it is an operation of thought through which we must translate ourselves into the thought of the other language, the forgotten thinking of the other language. We must translate ourselves into it and not make it come into our language. It is necessary to go towards the unthought thinking of the other language.

Tahar Wattar is seen in his novel "The earthquake" to insist on the demarcation of Algerian literature, not only by choosing to write in Arabic but also by choosing purposefully to delve into the national culture that is difficult to gasp and feel from outside.

### **Research questions:**

In a literary work, rich in cultural connotations and representations such as "The Earthquake", what attitude would the translator best adopt to better render the spirit of the work that has not only a cultural texture but also an artistic fabric demarcating a newly born genre and an identity seeking affirmation?

What would the translator's attitude towards the Other's culture? What aspects of this culture shall remain salient?

Is a retranslation of this work conceivable?

## **2. Literature Review:**

### **2.1 Translation and culture**

Culture has always been proved difficult to define as assessed by the many definitions abounding the literature on the subject (Ghazala, 2015, p. 2). As culture is tightly linked to language, Edward Sapir's definition, merits consideration in itself although it is not enough to fully grasp the concept. Culture, according to Sapir (1994 in Katan & Taibi, 2021, p. 31) is: "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". The expression "any other capabilities" is an indication that this concept is neither finite nor static. From a rather dynamic perspective, culture may be approached semiotically as a 'habitus', Bourdieu's term for "a system of durable, transposable dispositions", and of "internalized structures, common schemes of perception, conception and action", reflecting socialization at large which is constantly changing and affecting our reality and the way we act on it (Bourdieu 1990, I Katan and Taibi, 2021, p. 38). Trompenaars (in Katan and Taibi, 2021, p 46) categorizes culture into three layers: the outer layer consisting of "artefacts and products;" the middle layer consisting of "norms and values; and the core layer consisting of "basis assumptions." The core level is not seen but is implicitly sensed and activated when interacting between members of the same community who acquired, from generation to generation, knowledge of their environment. Obviously, what cannot be seen cannot lend itself easily for analysis, and this the layer of culture that causes most problems for translator and is at the origin of translation impossibility and cultural blockage.

### **2.2 Approaches to translating culture**

When translating literature, the most obvious obstacle the translator comes across is culture. What behavior would the translator adopt towards cultural specificities? See, from above, the way culture is treated has been affected by the general trends of translation studies. David Katan (2012) summarizes this

treatment in three approaches, which represent the natural historical development of translation studies.

**a) Reducing difference**

The first time culture was debated in translation studies, it was felt to be a source of hindrance to understanding and to the fluency of the text to be produced and thus the reaction was to naturalize the text and neutralize difference. According to this approach, the reader has not to experience a 'culture bump' (Katan, 2012, p. 4). Katan compares this approach to that advocated by Eugene Nida in his famous dynamic translation and what it triggers in terms of the closest natural effect. This approach is also recognized in functional translation and Skopos theory, whereby the translator projects his task into the possible use(s) of his text(s) and react accordingly, by bringing necessary modifications in terms of adaptation and appropriation as to remove cultural obstacles for the potential reader. Thus, culture is considered a barrier to understanding and no attempt is made here to assimilate the other or to offer him hospitality.

Nida associate this cultural blockage to information load which "is related to the speed at which new information is introduced and to the amount of new information which the language normally incorporates in particular constructions" (Larson 1984 in Katan & Taibi, 2021, p. 315).

**b) Highlighting difference**

This approach expounded in post-colonial era as many voices rose against cultural hegemony and fought for their right of difference "This approach pits itself against the dominating colonial master voice in translation, to safeguard the voices of subaltern languages and literature." (Katan, 2012, p. 5). Accordingly, culture is no more seen as an obstacle to understanding, but a cornerstone in translating. Ghazala (2015, p. 21) confronts this approach with globalization, to explain this new interest in culture which came into being in an epoch known to be "the age of individualism, localism, nationalism, national pride, conflicting views, ideologies and attitudes, and adherence to

one's own culture, character, tradition, conventions, customs, beliefs and values of all types, no matter how clashing with those of the other.”

### **c) Translating between culture**

This cultural approach focusses on difference between self and other in terms of communicability and in terms of reader tolerance of cultural distance. Thus, the translator is seen to use a hybrid approach and mix between different techniques to decide what to adopt and what to adapt so that the receiver is not blocked in terms of communication and for translation to fulfil its purpose of hospitality and also of communication. As this approach focusses on “intercultural communication”, some scholars mistakenly associate this approach to Nida's dynamic translation (functional approach). Yet, as Katan clearly explains:

[t]he translator here, first gauges the relative distances (in terms of cognitive environment, appropriacy, norms, values and beliefs) between the source and target contexts of culture, and second, as privileged reader, negotiates levels of tolerance for difference according to original and new intentions. This requires bicultural competence and the ability to (dis)associate and take a third perceptual position (Katan 2002 in Katan, 2012, p. 5)

Translation is no more situated amid a struggle between the translator's culture and the author's culture seeking domination and representation, but is rather seen to be a peaceful compromise beneficial for both sides as it results in mutual understanding as nicely expressed by Cordonnier (2002, p. 45): “plus je connaîtrai l'Autre dans ses textes, plus il me connaîtra dans mes textes, mieux nous nous comprendrons.”

### **Tahir Wattar's novel “Azilzal” (The earthquake)**

*The Earthquake*, is a novel written by the Algerian novelist Tahir Wattar in 1974, translated by William Granara in 1999. It tells the story of a learned man (Abdelmajid Boularwah) who came from Algiers to Constantine, to search for his relatives in order to bequeath

them his land properties as to escape the government's confiscation initiated in the occasion of the agrarian revolution it espouses at the time. During this one day journey in Constantine, Shaykh Boularwah tracks the life of people and expresses his disgust and fury against the state of decadence into which the city turned. Throughout the novel the reader is allowed to penetrate in Boularwah's mind and travel between his present and past, highlighting the contrast between his different feelings, which is a reflection of the real contrast in the life of Algerians after independence. His despising reaction to people's around him and his continuous call for disaster upon them is but an image of hatred and abomination post-independence Algerians were suffering from.

Granara (1999, p. 12) recognizes Wattar's attempt in this work to demarcate the Algerian modern novel- long been influenced by the French culture and language- by choosing to get back "to the indigenous sources of Algeria's culture, beginning with his choice of the Arabic language" and penetrating the emotional reality this culture creates in their daily life and characterizes their unique identity.

He created a novel that expresses emotions which French cannot, and is imbued with Islamic symbols and allegories that resonate values and sensibilities that French political domination and secular culture tried to suppress.

Throughout the novel, the author is seen to resort to religious references especially from the Qur'an. A specific Qur'anic verse reoccurs throughout, which is that describing the earthquake and the Day of Resurrection, which acts as a reminder of the title of the novel and the main theme of the work: "Every suckling female will forget her suckling and every pregnant female will discharge her burden, and you will see men drunk, yet it will not be in intoxication. Indeed, God's punishment will be severe." Granara seems aware of the importance of this religious reference which is, in fact, not meant to be interpreted

religiously but is rather a cultural demarcation for the Algerian identity. He also recognizes that Wattar’s novels are open to many interpretations as “they may be read at different levels and from various angles [...] and challenge the reader to think more carefully” (Ibid, p. 13)

### Analyzing cultural samples from the novel

The following are some examples of cultural expressions typical to Algerians Wattar used in his novel “Al-Zilzal” (the Earthquake), and their counterparts as rendered by the translator, William Granara. Light is shed on the different strategies the translator adopted and their eventual effect on the reader.

Constantine is like the Kaaba, it brings good luck when you enter it on Friday!	قسنطينة مثل الكعبة، يستحب دخولها يوم الجمعة (ص1)
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In this first example, for instance, we notice an effacement in Granara’s translation. The Kaaba, though transcribed literally, is not referred to with the same cultural feeling in the original. In the religious culture of Muslims, it is established through the prophet’s sayings that it is better for Muslims visiting the Kaaba, to accomplish Hajj or Umra, to do that on Friday, not for luck, but for the symbolic meaning this day has in Islam. It is the day of their gathering for prayer and, according to religious scriptures, of their gathering hereafter.

Moreover, Constantine has been referred to by Algerians to be a small Kaaba, in reverence for the religious education Ibn Badis succeeded to vest on its inhabitants through his long-standing teachings dispensed by himself and by the Ulemas in his Association.

So, reducing the meaning to just “luck” is closing a door to the reader to grasp the full cultural dimension Tahar Wattar was trying to immerse them into.

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<p>I was so afraid that they'd swarm over it <b>like flies on the Day of Resurrection.</b></p>	<p>خشية أن يغمروها كالذباب، كأنهم في يوم الحشر (ص7)</p>
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In this second example, Granara opted for “Day of Resurrection” (with capital letters) to translate the original “Yawm al-hashar”. Yet, the two terms are not equivalents and their connotational meaning aimed at in the original is again lost. Moreover, in the original, it is the people who are described in this day, not flies; this people the author was annoyed with them were like flies surrounding his car, as if cramming like people would do on the Day of judgment. In the Algerian dialect, people use this metaphor to describe overcrowding. In such situation, it is not weird to hear people say “what’s a cram, as if we are facing judgment”. And in this context, there is a difference, in connotational meaning at least, between the Day of Resurrection and the Day of Judgment. The former means the day when all humankind will be brought back to life, while the latter means the day humankind will be assessed for their deeds in life and to be rewarded accordingly. In other words, judgment is subsequent to resurrection and it is on the day of judgment when people are seen cramped. This minor detail brings a huge difference in the reception of Wattar’s ideas and in understanding the cultural identity of the Algerian people the author was meticulously describing.

<p>People are content with their lot in life, satisfied with the blessings God has apportioned to them, except that they <b>blindly rush to the Day of Judgment.</b></p>	<p>والناس راضون بوضعيتهم، قانعون بما أجاد الله به عليهم، من فيئته، وبما قسم عليهم مقسم الأرزاق لولا أنهم يعجلون قيام الساعة بالمروق (ص8)</p>
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In this third example, we notice Granara’s resort to suppression and re-expression of the original in a deviating way. People in the original are described by the author as being overall satisfied with God’s blessings but they were just hastening the Day of Judgment with their disrespect of God’s



precepts. However, the translator generalized the idea and suppressed a detail he probably did not consider essential for the meaning. “They blindly rush to the Day of Judgment” does not bring the meaning fully.

<p>He straightened himself up and prepared to perform his prayers. He imagined the great reformer Shaykh Ibn Badis in the pulpit with his animated expression.</p>	<p>عندما اعتدل، لأداء ركعتي تحية المسجد، تراءى له في المنبر الشيخ بن باديس بحركات وجهه النشيطة (ص 12)</p>
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In this example, the translator again suppressed two cultural details in the original: one related to the kind of prayer the character performed and the second related to the place in the masjid at which Ibn Badis was imagined to stand (the pulpit). Thus, the image recreated in the translation does not help understand the situation. In fact, the character was preparing himself to perform the greeting prayer when entering the masjid when he suddenly imagined Ibn Badis standing in the Minbar with his animated expressions. A huge difference is detected between the two version and a blur of the contextual situation is created.

<p>He resumed his prayers and stopped thinking about Ibn Badis. It was actually the movement of his right index finger that made him forget.</p>	<p>كان يتلو التحية، عندما تخلص نهائيا من التفكير في ابن باديس. أنسته فيه حركة سبابته اليمنى... (ص 12)</p>
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The author here attempted to create a sarcastic situation. The character was at the last stage of his prayer, moving his finger for to perform the final greeting ending the prayer, when suddenly forgot about Ibn Badis and start focusing on the movement of his index to remember a past anecdote about a student he dismissed from class because of his question about the importance of the movement of the finger when performing the prayer. In total, the character was not focusing in his prayer and each time his concentration is cut by a diverting thought. In the translation, however, the idea is different. The stage at which the second

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diversion happens is not clearly indicated (he resumed his prayer), then he stopped thinking of Ibn Badis as if the source of diversion is under control (he normally escaped the first source of diversion, when he was to be caught once again by another source: his index this time).

I'll get a bite to eat, whatever I can find, he thought.	أكل لقمة ويفرجها ربي (ص 15)
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In this example, the translator misinterpreted the original expression. This is a dialectal expression, Algerians and all Arabs are found to say when they feel hungry and like to interrupt their work or task at hand to eat something "I will get a bite, then will resume my work" (Literally, I'll eat a bite, then God will dispel all my worries). The translator, however, misinterpreted the second part of the expression (may God dispel my worries) and attached it to the first part (having to do with the bite to eat).

The truth of the matter is that half a million people are just too many for this city. The walls look as though they're slanting. There's no doubt they're showing signs of fatigue. 'Every suckling female will forget her suckling and every pregnant female will discharge her burden, and you will see men drunk, yet it will not be in intoxication. Indeed, God's punishment will be severe". God says the truth	الحق . نصف مليون كثير جدا على هذه المدينة. أمة...الجدران تبدو منصبة إلى هنا بعض الشيء. حالة الوهن بادية عليها، ما في ذلك ريب... (تذهل كل مرضعة عما أرضعت وتضع كل ذات حمل حملها، ترى الناس سكارى وما هم سكارى، ولكن عذاب الله شديد) صدق الله العظيم. ص 16
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This is the first time Tahar Wattar makes a reference to the earthquake as described in the Qur'an. Later we will see this same verse or part of it reiterated in slightly different manners and contexts. In fact, this religious (Quranic reference) springs up naturally. It is so common to find

Muslims in general illustrating their sayings or declarations by full or partial religious quotations either from the Qu’ran or the Sunnah. The meaning that can be deduced by such reference is the result of the combination between the mundane saying and its religious illustration; it is just meant to create a situation liable to trigger connotations and mental associations, without intending to emphasize on the religious dimension itself. The translator reacted to this Quranic verse more formally than it was intended. He relied on a scholarly interpretation of this verse and annotated his text at the bottom, opting thus for a thick translation, a technique a translator uses when he fails to adapt or appropriate a given cultural specificity. Appiah (2000: 427) explains that this type of translation “ seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context.” Although, his attitude to this chunk of discourse is legitimate, the effect it produced is different from what is was actually meant to produce. As a remedial of this situation, an explanation should have ensued about the sociological motivation of the character having pronounced the utterance. A Muslim, in a purely sociological context, would spontaneously make a Quranic reference whenever an occasion arises. For instance, in a previous example, Boularwah observing a huge number of people circumscribing his car, described them as people gathering for the Day of Judgment. It is not a religious context per se, but a mirror of the internal world of social being immersed in this culture.

There is no power or strength saves in God! Is this really the Belbey Restaurant that was frequented by aghas, pashas, shaykhs and all the upper class? Where wealthy landowners and cattle herders came to meet? 'That day you will see every suckling female forget her suckling, every pregnant female will discharge her burden, and you will see men drunk, yet it will not be in intoxication.' God has spoken the truth.

لا حول ولا قوة إلا بالله. أحقا هذا هو مطعم بلبي، الذي عرف الأغوات والباشوات والمشايخ وكبار القوم، أصحاب الأرض والأغنام والجاه... (يوم ترونها تذهل كل مرضعة عما أرضعت وترى الناس سكارى وما هم بسكارى...) صدق الله العظيم (ص 17)

This is the second time, the author makes a reference to the same Quranic verse related to earthquake (from Surate al-hajj). Reading the original text, we spontaneously understand the stream of consciousness the character in the novel is experiencing. In fact, when seeing the miserable situation in which the restaurant turned, the character links it to the apocalypse presaged in the Quran on the last day of this world. It is a sort of a reminding that nothing shall remain the same in this world, and what's happening to this restaurant and to very place in Algeria is, by way of exaggeration, of the same nature. To make this reference and this stream of consciousness natural in translation without banning the cultural connotation, it would have been better to start with God has verily said the truth "that day you will see every suckling female forget her suckling, every pregnant female will discharge her burden, and you will men drunk, yet it not be of intoxication."

The real Constantine is finished. I mean, it has already been struck by an earthquake. No one's left from the old days. Where is the Constantine of Belbey and Belfagoune, Ben Jaloul, Bel Tshikou and Ben Kara? There's already been an earthquake, it's come and gone, and Ben Finara and Ben Shair, Benfoul, Ben Tamin and every Ben so and-so have arisen in its aftermath.'

قسنطينة في الحقيقة انتهت. أقول زلزلت زلزالها. لم يبقى من أهلها أحد كما كان. أين قسنطينة بلباي وبلفقون وبن جلول وبن تشيكو وبن كرامة؟ زلزلت زلزالها. زلزلت زلزالها وحل محلها قسنطينة بوفنارة وبوالشعير وبوالفول وبوطمين وبو كل الحيوانات والنباتات. (ص 22)

In the example above, Tahir Wattar makes it clear what he means by the association he makes between the living conditions and the social life in the city of Constantine and the earthquake stated in the Quran. In fact, according to him the earthquake has already taken place in Constantine,

when noblemen were replaced by other people of unknown origins whose names are sarcastically described as being derived from the name of plants and animals. The translator clearly misses this last point and resorted to the literal translation of the names of people mentioned as if he was dealing with proper names per se, thus effacing the sarcasm created in the original.

<p>'One of the municipal trucks was carrying jars of spoiled goods confiscated from a few stores. As soon as it dumped its load, all hell broke loose.'</p> <p>'What do you mean, all hell broke loose?'</p> <p>All year long hordes of people who live in the caves, old people, middle-aged, youngsters, men and women, swarm around the Boul-farayis dump and rummage through the garbage.</p>	<p>كانت إحدى شاحنات البلدية تحمل علب مصبرات فاسدة، صودرت من مختلف المتاجر، ما أن أفرغت الشاحنة حمولتها، حتى هجم عليها "هاجوج وماجوج"</p> <p>- وما هاجوج وماجوج هذا.</p> <p>- خلق كثير من سكان الأكواخ. شيوخ وكهول وأطفال، ذكور وإناث، يحومون طوال السنة حول مزبلة بولفرايس" (ص 57)</p>
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In this example, the author makes use of a religious reference "Yajouj and Majouj" (Gog and Magog) to describe the hordes of people assembling around the dump attempting to amass the spoiled food that they could not find better to feed on. In colloquial Arabic, the name of Yajouj and Majouj is slightly distorted to "Hajouj wa Majouj". However, the translator, contrary to what he did previously (foreignizing and translating literally), chose to render this expression by a paraphrase "all hell broke loose". Thus, the cultural connotation derived from this religious reference is lost and the association created between the actual event and this intertextuality is again effaced.

## **Conclusion**

From the samples analyzed above, we can clearly see that the translator adopted a hybrid approach mixing between literal translation and adaptation as regards the so many religious references made by the author in the original. The first time, the Qur'anic verse (from surat al-haj) was used, he resorted to thick translation (annotating the text at the bottom of the page, explaining in scholarly manner the Qur'anic verse through an official translation by a renowned translator). He, sometimes, was seen to give minute attention to social religious expressions such as "la hawla wa la quwata ila billah" which is not meant principally as a religious connotation, but is a ready-made expression historically immersed in religion but has become a way to show an attitude of discontent and dissatisfaction, which can be rendered differently in different contexts in English (for example, "what a mess", "No", "My god", etc). At other points, he was seen to resort to over-generalization and omission, as to milder the effect of foreignness and bridge the communicative gap between the source text and the target text. Translation of culture especially in a dense work of literature requires due attention not only to the writer's intention and implicature and to respecting the right of others to be different, but also to appropriateness and to the cognitive load the overuse of cultural connotations may provoke in such a work. A hybrid method (mixing between literal and free translation) is deemed necessary in this respect. A retranslation is conceivable to highlight other cultural facets effaced inadvertently or for communicational purposes in Granara's version.

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