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Lost in Literary Translation: Reflections upon Mercurial Interpretations of Rumi's Works

الخسارة في الترجمة الأدبية: تأملات في التأويلات الزببقية لأعمال الرومي

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Abstract

The field of translation underwent persistent changes over time; and yet, giving birth to perfectly translated works remains chimerical. Literature, being central to this interdisciplinary field, proved to be an issue for translators and academics alike. Poems, particularly, gained massive attentions due to their special structures and aesthetics. Chiefly, complex poetical works tend to be arduous challenges to translators, for the socio-cultural inclinations and symbols they carry, and poems of Rumi are no exceptions. The latter is a Persian poet whose works spring from the Sufi tradition. Translations of Rumi saw light during the nineteenth century, and proliferated by the end of the following one. In America, the English translations of these poems gained a revolutionary fame, and were known as "The Rumi Phenomenon". In the Orient, however, they triggered controversy among Muslims, and were accused of being unfaithful to originals. Coleman Barks' translations were even considered as fictionalised versions for the transformative changes he introduced to Rumi's poems. Ergo, this paper intends to delve into the English translations of Rumi, highlighting the motives controlling them. Also, using in-depth data analysis, this work aims at identifying differences of the social reception of The Rumi Phenomenon in America and the Orient.

ملخص

رغم المساعي الحثيثة الرامية الى تحقيق الموضوعية والمثالية عند ترجمة النصوص الأدبية إلا أن ذلك يبقى صعب المنال في ظل تواجد العديد من العوائق اللغوية والثقافية وحتى الاجتماعية. هذه الموانع مجتمعة تفقد النصوص المترجمة الروح حينا، والبناء أحيانا. وإن ترجمة الأشعار لأكثر الأنواع الأدبية إضناء للمترجم، وذلك عائد لخصوصيتها الشكلية والجمالية. ولعل أصعب الأشعار ترجمة أثرها رصيذا لغويا وثقافيا. وتعد قصائد الشاعر الفارسي الصوفي جلال الدين البلخي، الملقب بالرومي، أكثر الأشعار صعوبة للترجمة نظرا للطابع الأيديولوجي والعقائدي الذي يميزها. رغم هذا، إلا أن أعمال الرومي شهدت ثورة ترجمية دأب صيتها في أصقاع العالم غربا وشرقا. ففي أمريكا، لقيت ترجمة كولمان باركس لأعمال الشاعر الصوفي رواجاً منقطع النظير سرعان ما تحول إلى ظاهرة عرفت لاحقا بظاهرة الرومي. عكس نظيرتها الأمريكية، تعرضت أعمال باركس المترجمة الى سيل من الانتقادات في الضفة الموازية بالشرق، حتى أنه تم التشكيك في صحتها نظرا لتعدد التغييرات التي أحققها بها مبنى ومعنى وسياقا. لذا، ارتأى كاتب هذا العمل البحثي القيام بدراسة معمقة نوعا وتحليلا بالفصوص في طيات هذه الأعمال، لتحديد الخلفيات التي أدت بالكاتب الى إجراء تغييرات جذرية مماثلة، مع تسليط الضوء على صداها الاجتماعي في أمريكا، كما في المشرق.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الترجمة الأدبية
الشعر
الصوفية
ظاهرة الرومي.

1. introduction

For many academics, translating literature is reckoned to be a herculean mission, for it is a special textual body, breathing art, and rife with socio-cultural fingerprints (Cincan, 2020). Poetry, being the most complex literary genre, is the most challenging type when it comes to translation, for a number of reasons besieging this operation (Anjum, 2016). Rumi, the Persian mystic and poet, had his works travelling through different spots of the universe. His Persian pieces of poetry, translated into English, have shaken the Western bookshelves by the turn of the twentieth century. In the American literary market, Coleman Barks' versions were a revolutionary success, and were known as The 'Rumi Phenomenon'. The latter displayed Islam from a domesticated point of view in the name of 'New Sufism' (Furlanetto, 2013), turning Rumi's works into novel creations, born out of original ones (Balaban et al., 1999). Hence, between sources and translations, the present paper intends to review the main conceptions lying on the edges of Rumi's road towards success.

2. Literary Translation & Cultural Orientations

In a globalised world, shrinking into a small village wherein cultural legacies meet and melt, the need for translation in a number of human activities became necessary, and works of literature are no exceptions (Schulte, 1978). Hence, literary translation occupies a key space within the universal field of translation nowadays, for it allows prose, drama, film scripts and poetry to cross boundaries and to permeate different cultures (Wisajiron, 2012), enchanting peoples with a variety of arts, and granting them the chance to transmit knowledge, and to get glimpses at each other's experiences (Brooks, 2017).

2.1 Literature & Translation

Translating literature is, assuredly, a tough row to hoe. Furthermore, no machine is said to be able to do translators' job (Balaban et al., 1999). Verily, translators per se are likely not to succeed in giving birth to perfectly fulfilled translations. In this vein, a literary translator can be likened to:

A musician who catalyses the otherwise inert score that embodies Mozart's genius. In that act, musician

and composer become a creative team. However, just because the musician can keep the time and scratch out the correct notes, in the correct order, it will not necessarily be good music. Musical skills inevitably enter into the equation (Balaban et al., 1999, p. 67).

In other words, bringing linguistic equivalents to source texts is of remote utility, as semantics, or stylistics, are of utmost weight for a safe transfer of literariness (Tahiri & Capriki, 2020). It is for this reason, that a good grasp of source and target socio-cultural contexts is paramount for a better mastery of meaning, and therefore, for a faithful translation to be achieved. Regarding this matter, John Balaban, an American poet and translator, along with his fellow academics, proceeds the above mentioned comparison by stating that "fidelity, true fidelity, comes from a musician's deep understanding of the music" (Balaban et al., 1999, p.67). In this quote, Balaban alluded to the paramount role that mastery of the languages of sources and translations, their socio-cultural dimensions, as well as the 'about-texts' comprehension, plays in the process of translating literature.

2.2 Translatability of Poetry & Major Issues

Inks having been spilt over the translatability of poetry seem to be perpetual. The absence of clear-cut rules that govern this operation, besides the presence of multiple issues hindering the well flowing of poetic texts from one language to another, is in fact what makes the situation hard to be handled without side-effects (Abbaspour et al., 2020).

2.2.1 Linguistic, Aesthetic & Semantic Issues

Actually, although some academic voices argue that they are easy to be translated, poems are still considered by the vast majority as the hardest literary genre when it comes to translation, for the special considerations given to their linguistic and aesthetic structures, the thing that made it difficult to come up with an optimum translation (Wisajiron, 2012). Even in cases where "every word is magically turned into its doppelganger, and in which form, sound, and rhetoric are retained, [a translated poem] is still a product of misprision" for "raw information will be preserved, but the aesthetic unity, the gestalt of the poem, will

be lost in translation” (Balaban et al. , 1999, p.66-67).

Therefore, a translated poem is recognized to be a novel creation, mostly changing the outer look, while holding “the essence of its source” (Chopra, 1998, p.67). Balaban (1999), along with his fellow colleagues, has better epitomised the situation when he compared Chinese poems, that have been translated into English, to a Chinese-made car being stolen and delivered to an American chop shop for external alterations, “despite its glossy American exterior, it is a Chinese engine that makes the vehicle run” (p.67). So is a poem that has been originally written in Chinese, for instance; even if it could be re-written in another language, English for example, expressing the exact same original content in the appropriate equivalent words of the target, the poem in its translated version would still carry a Chinese spirit. Equally, so is any poem undergoing a journey of translation. A new creation must be born out of this process, for originals would never be semantically the same once they are picked out of their mother contexts, to be uttered in different tongues.

2.2.2 The Socio-Cultural Factors

Forsooth, translators of poetry usually find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place. Their structure-committed works usually fail to convey the real source messages, while content-oriented ones are likely to lose their organised bodies in the process of translation. Moreover, the more the metrical verse is heavy with symbols and socio-cultural references, the harder translation would be (Anjum, 2016); this is because culture and language share mutual influence, and also because “language is not a vocal or written procedure that is practised in isolation from cultural and environmental factors” (Jarrar, 2016, p.29).

According to Wisajiron, a researcher, the socio-cultural issues that translators of poetry face, lie into four layers: ecology, behaviour, product and ideas. While ‘ideas’ refer to the set of beliefs and the number of values that poems usually carry, ‘behaviour’ encompasses the customs or the collective habits expressed in these works of literature. Also, ‘products’ comprise artistic components and symbols (music, artefacts...), while ‘ecology’ covers nature-related elements like “flora, fauna, plains, winds, and weather” (2012,

p.50). Above these layers lies ideology, which stands as an additional ordeal for translating works with ideological backgrounds or fingerprints. This aspect, specifically, serves a key role during the process of translation for it both carries the general mind-set of the piece under work, and because it also shapes the reception of poems on the targeted side (Abbaspour et al., 2020).

In fact, all of the previously mentioned layers, or issues, are actually embedded within words, phrases, or expressions, in a way or another. Therefore, translators should first dig into those socio-cultural components, recognize the role they play in the original meaning, then do their best to come up with a translation that preserves their significance equally on the parallel side. For this, the translator should use a number of approaches, cultural equivalents mainly.

3. Rumi & a Multifaceted Journey of Translations

Jalal al-Din El-Rumi, a poet of all times, whose works travelled the different edges of world, is recognized as a salient model for transcultural translation, for his works saw life in the east, to be carried to the west, in the hands of Western literary translators (Furlanetto, 2013). This thirteenth century Persian Sufi mystic was known as Mawlana in Persia, and as Rumi in the Western side of the world (Qamber, 1988).

By the switch of the second half of the twentieth century, the world conjured up Rumi’s works. The latter went through revolutionary waves of translations, and reached the pinnacles of fame and success through different global arcades.

3.1 Rumi: Life, Works, & Death

In the fall of 1207, about 250 kilometres away from Balkh, today’s Tajikistan, Jalal al-Din Muhammad bin Muhammad al-Balkhi al-Qunuwi came to life in a city called Vakhs. The Sufi mystic was born for a famous Sufi family; his father was the well-known Sufi teacher, jurist and preacher Bahâo Din Walad. The latter influenced his son and ensured to provide him with a good education (Thomas et al., 2012).

Rumi, along with his family, kept moving throughout different places, running away from the Mangol invasions (Shahi, 2019). At a very young age, he moved to Balkh (in what is now known as ‘Afghanistan’),

Samarkand, then to Nishapur where his intelligence and talents caught the attention of Faridu-d-Din Attar, also known as Attar of Nishapur, a prominent Sufi poet and mystic at that time. In Larinde, in 1224, at the age of seventeen, Rumi married Gawhar Khatun. The couple, then, gave birth to two sons, namely, Sultan Walad and Ala I-Din (Thomas et al., 2012).

After that, by 1229, the family moved to Konia where Rumi spent a good deal of his life. Konia was a Roman province in nowadays' Turkey. It is there, and for this reason, that Jalal al-Din Muhammad was labelled as "The Roman" or "Rumi" (Mustapa & Jaafar, 2017). After Konia, Rumi lived in Anatolia, where his father became in charge of a 'madrasa' (school or institution meant to teaching religious sciences), then he moved to the Seljuk Empire (Shahi, 2019).

In 1231, Rumi's father died leaving to his family, Jalal al-Din Muhammad mainly, knowledge, fame, and a religious prestige and heritage documented in 'Maaref', a dairy in which he explained his thoughts and beliefs about Sufism and the Sufi traditions. It is after this event, that Rumi engaged in a professional life, not far different from his father's one. In the same year in which Bahâo Din Walad passed away, Jalal took the lead of the same school his father was managing. He also started giving lectures about religious sciences and literature (Thomas et al., 2012).

Jalal al-Din Muhammad also founded the 'Maulavis', encouraging religious music and dancing, the thing that placed him in a controversial position. However, whenever asked about the reason of the creation of such group of whirling 'Derviches', Rumi used to answer, "When the human spirit, after years of imprisonment in the cage and dungeon of the body, is at length set free, and wings its flight to the Source whence it came, is not this an occasion for rejoicings, thanks, and dancing?" (qtd. in Mustapa & Jaafar, 2017, p.04).

Jalal's turning point in life was his encounter with Shams, a mystic who became Rumi's closest companion and best friend. Shams, fully known as Shams al-Din Tabrizi, "was a Qur'anic scholar, a theologian of intense passion and learning, an ascetic and highly advanced adept in Sufi mysteries" (Thomas et al., 2012, p. 487). According to many researchers,

he is the one who mostly inspired Jalal, and he is the one who perfected his mysticism (Mustafa & Jaafar, 2017).

Rumi left a good deal of philosophical poetical texts and prose. In his thirty-six thousands verses' book, entitled *Divan Shams al-Din Tabrizi*, he dispersed his transcendental thoughts about love and Sufism. He also wrote 'Ruba'iyat', a book consisting of more than three thousands of fascinating verses. Other works of his included 'Makatib', a practical set of letters to a number of companions, 'Fihi ma Fihi' in which he spoke about social and religious matters, as well as 'Majalis-i-Sabah' a set of spiritual speeches that Rumi delivered in various religious occasions. Nevertheless, his *Mathnawi-ye Ma'nawi*, a six-volume book that took him about a dozen years to be fulfilled, remains the most fascinating, the most popular. It is the work in which he shared his spirituality and Sufism (Mustapa & Jaafar, 2017).

All of Jalal's writings reflected a philosophy of his own that was shaped by three major figures whom he was influenced by. In other words, the quality and creativity of Rumi's works was incomparable to his fellow mystics and poets at the time, and this is thanks to the impacts that his father Bahâo Din Walad, aside with his teacher Faridu-Din 'Attar and his friend Shams al-Din Tabrizi, had over his philosophy and ideas (Lewis, 2000). Another person who influenced Rumi was his disciple Husamuddin Ghalab, who urged him to writing *Mathnawi-ye Ma'nawi*. Rumi's works are full of joy, optimism and tolerance (Mustapa & Jaafar, 2017). Therefore, there is no wonder why translating Rumi has always been a trend among translators from different parts of the world, Europe and U.S. mainly. His fame is logical, as it is the outcome of a mixture of deep knowledge with exceptional creativity.

In the autumn of 1273, Rumi passed away in Konia. His funeral was attended by believers and preachers from different sects, and different religions. It was a ceremonial funeral of forty days (Mustapa & Jaafar, 2017), some say sixty days, where Muslims, Jews, Christians and people from all religious orientations, have together celebrated Rumi, being a symbol of religious tolerance and love (Cunningham, 2020).

3.2 One Rumi, Many Translations

Vigorous discussions have been made upon Rumi's originals and translations. Comparisons were conducted and research was held to delve into the mysteries of these poems, to measure the extent to which these works are faithful, and to spot the secret behind the unprecedented attention they gained among readers from different backgrounds. Hence, a number of translations have been detected and analysed; amongst which are: Andrew Harvey's *Speaking Flame: Rumi (1989) & The Teachings of Rumi (1999)*, Jonathan Star's *Rumi: In the Arms of the Beloved (2008)*, Gamard & Farhadi's *The Quatrains of Rumi: Ruba 'Iyat- Jalaluddin Muhammad Balkhi-Rumi (2008)*, Shahram Shiva's *Rending the Veil (2015)*, as well as Coleman Barks' *Open Secret (1999) & The Essential Rumi (2004)* (Kaynat, n.d.).

One of those who underwent the venture of translating Rumi is Andrew Harvey. The latter is a British, Indian born, theologian, scholar and poet who came to life in 1952. Like most of those Western translators who translated Rumi's works, his translations are more of personal interpretations than faithful transfers of source texts. Differences in the meanings of sources and translations, as well as the choice of words in his book, titled, *Rumi: In the Arms of the Beloved* is crystal clear. At times, the two facets of these poems, i.e. originals and their translations, not only express slightly different tenors, but also deliver totally opposite meanings or messages.

In one of his translations, Harvey says:

“Last night,
I touched your beauty,
Woke an alchemist” (p. 26)

When meaning in a more accurate translation (which was a source text for Harvey's translation) was:

“Until the love of my faithful idol seized me, I was copper.

It seized me like an alchemical elixir.

I searched for him with a thousand hands;

(But) he stretched out an arm and seized me by the foot” (p. 26)

(qtd in Kaynat, n.d.)

Differences in the meaning as well as the choice of words is clear. Verily, each one of the two versions expresses a meaning that is far different from the other. While the first one (that of Harvey) considers the man in love as the “master of alchemy” (p. 26), so as to say that love has a mysterious ability in the way it empowers those who have been enthralled by its spell, the second translation (that of Ibrahim Gamard & Rawan Farhadi) sees that love weaken people. It is worth noting that Harvey did not rely upon Rumi's originals when fulfilling his own translations. Rather, his work, titled *Speaking Flame: Rumi*, was based on already translated versions of Gamard and Farhadi, the thing that might be a major cause behind the changes that occurred to the meaning of his own interpretations (Kaynat, n.d.).

Another translation of his goes like this:

“All my mysteries are images of you
Night, be long!
He and I are lost in Love” (p.27)

These poetical lines were supposed to deliver the same meaning as the one that Gamard and Farhadi's translations convey in the following verses:

“The secrets of my heart are all thoughts of (my) beloved.

O night, don't pass quickly,

For there is work for me (to do)” (p.27)

(qtd in Kaynat, n.d.)

Glaringly, the first translation could be immediately understood as a longing of a lover for his beloved during a night-time. However, the original meaning, that Gamard and Farhadi's succeeded to approach, was a soliloquy through which Rumi expressed his wishes for the night to be as long as possible so that he would be able to pray and worship as much as he can, to unfold his feeling and thoughts to his beloved, i.e. God almighty.

Another figure, whose writings were mostly English interpretations of Rumi's works, is Jonathan Star. The

latter, like a number of his fellow translators, was not faithful to originals. In his translation of verses from Jalal's *A Garden beyond Paradise*, he not only added some words that do not exist in the original versions, but also he changed the meaning to almost the opposite sense.

It is worth mentioning that although there are some translators who intentionally attempted to redirect Rumi's philosophical orientations by exposing his texts to numerous modifications, other translators gave birth to unfaithful translations simply because of a lack of adequate linguistic competence or cultural mastery. An Iranian translator, whose name is Sharam Shiva, is an example who belongs to this category. In *Rending the veil*, one of his works in which he laid down translations of Rumi's poems, he modified the overall original meaning of some poetical verses due to a mistranslation of a single word (Kaynat, n.d.).

3.2.1 Coleman Barks' Versions

Coleman Barks is an American poet and translator whose English translations "popularised Rumi's poetry, particularly in the USA" (Azadibougar & Patton, 2015, p.172). These translations were characterised by romanticising Rumi's poems. In his work, entitled *The Essential Rumi* (1995), Barks' translations turned Rumi's divine ruminations on love from their spiritual and philosophical direction towards a human and sexual orientation (Abbaspour et al., 2021). The paradoxical fact in this is that Barks knows nothing about Persian, the original language through which Rumi's works were written (Kaynat, n.d.), the thing that exposed his translations to harsh criticism that they were accused of being versions rather than translations, and at other times they were considered as mere 'mistranslations' (Mehdi et al., 2021).

Samples showing the changes that Barks introduced poems of Rumi to can be seen from different angles throughout the different collections of translated poetry inside his books. One of them is the translation of already translated verses from one of Jalal's quatrains. These verses said:

"Let the beauty we love be what we do

There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground" (25)

While, originally, the meaning is considered to be more identical to Gamard and Farhadi's following translation:

"There are a hundred kinds of prayer, bowing, and prostration

For the one whose prayer-niche is the beauty of the Beloved" (p.25)

Obviously, there is a massive change in the meaning of what are meant to be interpretations of same verses. The literal translation of Rumi's original was about the many and different ways through which Sufi people pray. Barks, however, stripped the meaning away from its Islamic inclinations, and added words that have no place and no sense in the original equivalent they are meant to reflect (Kaynat, n.d.).

4. New Sufism

Athwart popular views of a number of critics, literature's fans in the North-western parts of the world were fascinated by Barks' interpretations of the aforementioned mystic. This fascination, according to Elena Furlanetto, an Italian born literary expert, came as a result of the revision and remodelling of the Islamic thoughts taking part in works of Jalal. This renovation, Furlanetto proceeds, is "an evidence for another Islam far removed from the rhetoric of fundamentalism" (qtd in Azadibougar & Patton, 2015, p.172-173). Hence, this is the way "New Sufism" came to life as a refurbished alternative to its archaic version, known as "Sufism".

Thereupon, between Sufism and New Sufism, conflicting voices arose. From one side, there was a support for that new born ideology, while on the opposite scale there were those who criticised it for utilising the word 'Sufism' as a tool to advertise for things that have no thread with Sufi traditions and Islamic beliefs. In this vein, a group of researchers argued that New Sufism "has introduced quatrains of Rumi in music, songs, symphonies, and dances which are nothing but a show, devoid of any Islamic context"

(Mehdi et al., 2021, p.64).

5. The Social Reception of ‘The Rumi Phenomenon’

Since the moment he released his very first writings, Rumi was under the spotlight in his community. Nevertheless, his works did not reach the American lands until they were translated a long time after his death. Actually, those translations not only introduced this Persian guru to the American public, but also recalled the Oriental one of it. This memory, however, came back to the Orient newly dressed, in a way that copes with the ‘New Age’ socio-cultural fashion, and this is what engendered severe and variant social reactions and debates over it.

5.1 The Rumi Phenomenon in the U.S

De facto, the posthumous fame of Rumi in America was by dint of Coleman Barks’ versions, and was turned into an issue that has been labelled as “The Rumi Phenomenon” (Furlanetto, 2013). This phenomenon expresses the American fascination, not only with the so called Rumi’s works, but also with the newly displayed picture of Islam that these translations advertise for. It is worth noting that Barks’ versions sold “more than a quarter of a million copies in a country where Pulitzer Prize winning poets do not sell more than 10.000 books” (El-Zein, 2000, p.73). It is also worth considering that it is by dint of these translations that Islamic writings could find a special place among the American literary community in a time of ‘Islamophobia’ (Furlanetto, 2013); this is as the oversimplified Islamic notions, characterising Barks’ versions, allowed this religion to drift in the American avenues whose inhabitants have long absorbed the conventional fanatic image of Islam being adopted and displayed through the different Western media.

5.2 The Rumi Phenomenon in the Orient

Since the publication of the translated versions serving the ‘Rumi Phenomenon’ and its ideas on ‘New Sufism’, youth’s minds started to be shaped in the Orient as well. Fascination with such newly published books was highly criticised by a wide legion of academics. Some of them went far by accusing the Western translations of Rumi for negatively

washing youth’s brains, and teaching them fake Sufi versions. According to Muntazar Mehdi (2021), a Pakistani assistant professor of English, and two of his colleagues:

Rumi has a vast admiration among the youth of Pakistan. When it comes to the depiction of Rumi as the greatest Sufi the world has seen, foreign writers lack the proper admiration or the sense of attachment to this figure of history and so the result of their writings may have somewhat of a negative influence on the Pakistani youth (p.60).

The previously mentioned academic, along with his colleagues, believes that young Pakistani lovers of Rumi should not be influenced by Western interpretations in general as those translators are likely not to be aware of the spiritual status of the figure they are dealing with. Thus, they are likely to confuse these Oriental readers, who are curious to discovering Sufism, with writings delivering a decontextualized image of it (Mehdi et al., 2021).

6. Conclusion

In a nutshell, ideal literary translations remain elusive. In this regard, we have those who appreciate additions brought by translators, considering them as separate new creations. On the other front, we also have those who blame the non-literal translations, judging them to be blasphemous. In this matter, Rumi’s translated poems are no exception. Therefore, translations of Coleman Barks were received differently among readers from the opposite sides of the world. In the Orient, they were criticised for being unfaithful to their Islamic roots. In America, however, they were highly welcomed, for their romanticised nature. Overall, the whole thriving of translations of the Persian philosopher, among non-Muslims, could be justified by the endeavours to exhibit another perspective of Islam under the name of New Sufism.

Conflict of Interest

We, authors of this article, certify that this work is original, and that it is not under review in any other publication. We also certify that we are by no means affiliated in any type of organization benefitting from the content of the manuscript, be it with, or without

financial interest.

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