

Mistranslation of Three Cultural Signs: Rajm, Food, and Tayammum in Vambéry's *Travels in Central Asia*

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Abstract—Translation as a process of domesticating something alien is not restricted solely to linguistic domain; on the contrary, it can be extended to other arenas as well. For example, travel writing as an attempt to tame foreign culture and render it accessible for the audience in home culture, can be considered as a kind of cultural translation. When a travel writer enters into a new context (source culture), he encounters with signs which are radically different from those in his home culture. Hence, the travel writer is burdened to deforeignize hitherto unknown signs to render them familiar and consumable for his audience. Since the travel writer carries his cultural baggage which functions as a cultural filter, his cultural translation cannot be objective and free from cultural mistranslations, and as a result, the current article is going to focus on the cultural mistranslations in Arminius Vambéry's *Travel to Central Asia*. Thus, it argues that the travel writer in question in his journey to Central Asia which is a semi terra incognita in nineteenth century endeavors to translate the exotic aspects (foreign signs) of Central Asian culture; however, his cultural biases give rise to the cultural mistranslations in areas such as diet and religious punishment like stoning.

Index Terms—translation, travel writing, cultural mistranslation, central Asia

I. INTRODUCTION

The word “travel” etymologically is derived from “travail” which in Latin means “a torture instrument consisting of three stakes designed to rack body” (as cited in Gholi & Ahmadi, 2015, p.183). In the heart of this term lies the notion of mental and physical suffering. Serving as a criterion, the suffering in voyage differentiates an original traveler who endures an arduous travel and tests his stamina and valor along the road from a pampered tourist who does not endanger his/her life by barring him/herself from adventures and risks. Additionally, this aspect of travel has “the power to transform the lives of those survived it” (ibid.) notwithstanding, Seyd Islam (1996) is dubious about the life-transforming dimension of the travel since he believes that some travelers whom he calls sedentary travelers do not travel despite their physical movement due to carrying their borders on their backs. By definition, travel “is the negotiation between self and other that is brought about by movement in the space” (ibid.); and this mobility and dynamism which is interwoven with human existence bestows variety into humans’ otherwise dull and tedious lifestyle and works like a dose of medicine for the terror of death which is connected to immobility. At philosophical level, the reason behind travel, according to Fussell (1987), is dependent on John Locks’ *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which holds that, “knowledge comes entirely through the external senses, and from mind’s later contemplation of materials laid up in the memory as a result of sense experience” (ibid.), and consequently “if knowledge is rooted in rooted in experience and nowhere else, travel instantly gains in importance and desirability” (ibid). From the standpoint of psychology, the substantial joy of travel, Freud speculates, is located in “the fulfillment of... early wishes to escape the family and especially the father” (ibid.), but when it is analyzed in a large scale, the objects for undertaking travel varies from “exploration, conquest, colonization, diplomacy, emigration, forced exile, and trade to religious or political pilgrimage, aesthetic education, anthropological inquiry, and the pursuit of a bronzer body or bigger wave” (ibid.). Travel played a pivotal part in the birth of not only non-fictional subjects such as history, natural history, anthropology, and geography but also in a genre like novel fiction (ibid.) Nonetheless, the trips do not necessarily result in travel writing due to the fact that it is “a non-fictional first person prose narrative describing a person’s travel(s) and spaces passed through or visited which is ordered in accordance with, and whose plot is determined by the order of narrator’s act of travelling” (ibid).

Author’s Biography and His Itinerary in Central Asia

“Arminius Vambéry, an Orientalist-traveler, Turcologist, secret agent of Britain, guest of Queen Victoria in Windsor Castle, and political expert on Central Asian affairs, was born into a poor family in Hungary” (p.184) in 1831. Despite his financial problems, after his high school, he dedicates himself to learning European languages and literatures in his free time and learns them in a short period. Enthralled with the Orient, “all my musings, endeavors, thoughts, and feelings tended towards the Land of the East, which was beckoning to me in its halo of splendor” (p.184) he makes up his mind to pursue his luck there. Finally under the auspicious of Baron Joseph Eotvos, a minister of education, he can travel to Turkey so as to seek his oriental dream. After staying for some years in Turkey, he comes back to his

motherland and convinces the Hungarian Academy to offer him a grant so that he will “investigate the similarities of [sic] between Turkish dialect known as Chagatai and Hungarian” (p.184). Accordingly, he journeys to inside Persia as a disguised Osmanli dervish for one year. His chance to perform his linguistic study in the sealed territory of Central Asia arises as the travel writer encounters mendicant Tartar pilgrims in the embassy of Turkey in Tehran discussing their plan to travel back to their homeland in Central Asia; as a result, he presents himself as a Turk poor Sufi who desires to visit the shrines of holy saints there. Thanks to reading the parts of Koran like Muslims, he persuades his prospective companions follow them in their journey. They depart from Tehran to Turkmen Sahara, located in the north of Iran to Khiva. After staying in Khiva, they move to Bokhara. Then, they leave to Samarkand. There his companions depart to Chinese Tartary and leave him alone. With his new Oriental company, the travel writer make journey to Afghanistan. He offers his finding in Central Asia to Royal Geographical Society which immediately accepts it since it is well aware of its political importance. In England, he publishes his observation and adventure in the form of a travelogue entitled *Travels in Central Asia* in English which took six months to be finished. It sells very well in the Continent. Considering its literary value, Abraham (2003) states that its “narrative quite literally dazzle with detail ... [and] is distinguished with by magnificent prose style...at once lyrical and imminently readable” (as cited in Gholi & Ahmadi Musaabad, p. 185), and it explains why Marvin notes that “*Travels in Central Asia* for [its] graphic description and forcible diction has few equals in our literature of exploration” (ibid.). He dies in Budapest in 1913.

Theoretical Background: Similarities between a Translator and a Travel Writer

Susan Bassnett (2004) argues that there are “parallels between translators and travel writers” (p.70). The travel writers like the translators engage in the process of converting foreign contexts into familiar ones, but one linguistically while the other culturally. Concerning travel writing, when a travel writer embarks on a journey to an alien/source culture (mostly to the remotest territories), like a translator he encounters with an ocean of unfamiliar signs which are pronouncedly different from those of his home culture. The signs under question are crucial in defying his inherited cultural system. To clear this cultural hurdle, there are two methods for the travel writer. Firstly, by acknowledging the difference between the cultural signs which exist in travellers’ culture and those of home culture by means of giving extensive explanations about them. Secondly, by demystifying, domesticating, and decoding the cultural signs so that his readers in the home culture can have access to their cultural significance and consume them. On the positive side, according to Scholl (2009) both the travel writer and the translator pursue the same goal of promoting cross-cultural understanding (p. 108). On the native side, this act of linguistic and cultural translation/exchange does not takes place dispassionately although some translators and travel writers may claim in their works (p.110). Lack of objectivity in them stems from their cultural baggage, to borrow Ali Behdad, which both the travel writer and the translator carry it with themselves while dealing with the alterity. The baggage in question contains cultural prejudices and preconceived cultural assumptions; hence it fortifies the sense of cultural- racial narcissism in the travel writer and the translator. Additionally, it strongly hampers their attempts to rise above the confines of these fetters. Moreover, this invisible force plays a pivotal role in preventing them not only from immersing themselves in the source contexts to acknowledge the cultural significance of signs without distorting, but also from adapting the standpoint of an insider which is conducive to shattering the cultural barriers. According to Mary Louise Pratt successful translation by extension successful travel writing occurs when the translator and the travel writer dismisses his “cultural imagination” (as cited in Scholl, p.111)/ or cultural filter(s) because it functions as a yardstick to evaluate the source culture, and as a result, when the travel writer fails to set himself free from the shackles of his cultural imagination, his object of advancing cross-cultural dialogue collapses, and cultural mistranslation in his travelogue become inevitable.

II. METHODOLOGIES

This article is interdisciplinary in its nature since it fuses travel studies with translation ones. Additionally, it will draw on postcolonial theories in particular Orientalism since travel writing is political genre and has been used by Westerners in their colonization to justify and legitimize their presence and exploitation in their colonies. Accordingly, postcolonial theories can provide a suitable analyzing tool for unveiling travel writers’ cultural baggage or lenses which play key role when travel writers as cultural translators engage in the process of translating the cultural signs which they encounter during their journeys in alien and far-flung destinations. Since their cultural baggage prevent them from offering objective portrayal of their traversed zones, this article will concentrate on the mistranslation of cultural signs by Vambery in his travel to Central Asia due to clinging to his cultural baggage

III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Susan Bassnett (2004) in her article, *Travelling and Translating* delineates two types of translations which translators normally adopt in translation source texts. In the first kind of translation, translators foreignize the source texts, that is, they acknowledge the “intrinsic” difference between the source and target texts and signal them for their audience, and this explains why this sort of translation was advocated by postcolonial critics (p.72). The translators who translates in this manner are similar to what Lisel (2006) calls them as cosmopolitan travelers since “they reveal moments of empathy [and] recognitions of difference” (emphasis added, p.4). In fact, they respect their traversed culture, while the second type of the translators in lieu of “foreignization”, they translates on the basis of “domestication” and

“acculturation”, that is to say, they gloss over the difference between the source texts and target ones. Additionally, these translators’ main concern is catering for their readers’ needs for excitement and exoticism. This method of translation was favored by English translators; nevertheless, it was severely criticized on the grounds of “appropriating the foreign, of erasing difference and effectively colonizing text” (Bassnett, 2004, p.72). The translators in question closely resemble to colonial travel writers in their very travelogues “difference in any form is domesticated by the travel writer’s power to arrange events, others and objects into a coherent narrative” (Lisel, 2006, p.76). Considering what is said, this article argues that Arminius Vambery as a travel writer/cultural translator fits to second category of translators/traveler because he culturally mistranslate three cultural signs: stoning, food, and tayammum due to his inability in shattering his cultural baggage and in acknowledging the difference of the signs in question via presenting enough information about them. As to his cultural baggage, the following excerpts attests to it,

“The conquest of India was and is undoubtedly the glory of Western civilization; it is the best mark of the superiority of our European spirit, and the strength of young Europe compared with old and crumbling Asia” (as cited in Cain, 2006, p.80).

Rajm

Meaning stoning in Arabic language, Rajm is a cultural/ religious sign which is sometimes practiced in Islamic contexts, thus a new sign for the travel writer and it is culturally challenging for the travel writer/ cultural translator because the sign in question does not fit to the sign system of his home culture. To translate it properly, its signifier (its physical aspect) and signified (its concepts) needs to be delved carefully, but the travel writer in question does not appreciate the uniqueness of this sign in the Islamic context of Central Asia by foreignizing and giving correct information. Instead he distorts the sign and breathes wrong information into it, and the following fragment indicates it,

“To have cast a look upon a thickly veiled lady sufficed for the offender to be executed by the Redjm [Rajm/stoning] according as religion directs. The man is hung, and the woman is buried up to the breast in the earth near the gallows, and there stoned to death. As in Khiva there are no stones, they use Kesek (hard balls of earth). At the third discharge, the body, dripping with blood, is horribly disfigured, and the death which ensues alone puts an end to her torture” (1864, p. 139).

In the above passage, stoning as a punishment is related to adultery (or fornication). From Islamic perspective, the adultery is viewed as a grave sin which undermines the foundation of family and leads to its disintegration and spreading immorality in an Islamic community. As a result, it is has to prevented. In Islamic sharia, lashing and stoning (in some cases) is regarded as its preventive solutions; however, it will be simplistic to disregard the factors which are required to mete out its punishment. To administer it, a Muslim judge has to take into consideration some difficult criteria. These criteria have to be met before carrying out the punishment. In fact, the criteria for this religious sentence not only make the allegation hard to prove but also difficult to impose; the following passage points to its difficulty,

“The accused was forced to confess four times before his conviction was accepted; sentencing occurred if both perpetrator and victim admit the "crime". Otherwise, four independent male witnesses have to be found. These four witnesses must all profess to be direct eyewitnesses to the crime. If four men are not available, three men and two women will suffice” (Alasti, 2007, p.13).

With regard to stoning, Vambery instead of giving his Western readership accurate information about the factors which are necessary to carry out the punishment from the view point of Islamic sharia or how the Muslim looks at it, he provides wrong information about it and wrongly claims that only casting a glance at a fully covered woman is enough for the gazer to be subject of horrible punishment, which he describes in full detail to satisfy his readers’ need for something extremely exotic and odd. In fact, his mistranslation arises from his cultural baggage which makes him unwilling to understand the signs of the source culture without filtering from his Western regime of signs.

Food

Another cultural sign which travel writers frequently refers to it in their travelogues is food in the source culture. This cultural/culinary sign is similar to a new word in a source language for which there is no equivalent in a target language. Translating its signifier (its color, taste, ingredients) and its signified (its concept) pose a challenge for a translator because its dual aspects do not conform to his absorbed culinary system, and this naturally induces in them a sense of repulsion, and if he wants to offer its faithful rendering, he has to be receptive by acknowledging this different or exotic sign, as well as abandon his cultural baggage. With regard to Vambery, he travels to Central Asia in Victorian period when “travel writing displays explicit Orientalist disdain for the foods of the other, linking them with dirt and disgust thus rejecting the Other entirely” (Gholi & Ahmad, 2015, p.187). In other words, in this period, the sign under study was subject to mistranslation. During his journey through Central Asia, Vambery’s disguise himself as a poor Dervish, the only possible way to reach there. His masquerade enables him to have an access to culinary signs which were radically different from what he experience in his home culture. However, like other Victorian travellers he could not get above his cultural filters in translating culinary signs which he witness in Central Asia. The following extract indicates his cultural mistranslation,

“The quality and dressing of the meats which were served to us are not calculated to interest much our ‘gastronomes.’ I merely, therefore, in passing that horse-flesh and camel flesh were the order of the day: what other dishes represented our vision; I must decline mentioning” (Vambery, 1864, p. 61).

As a cultural translator, Vambery fails to acknowledge and provide enough information concerning eating camel and horse flesh in the context of Central Asian culture. Central Asians are Muslim and their food culture is based on this Islamic sharia and from Islamic standpoint eating the horse and camel flesh is not unlawful, and thus they are permitted to consume them. Additionally, Central Asians' nomadic lifestyle, the abundance of camels and horses as well as the lack of farming in the region rendered their flesh a suitable source of food for them. The travel writer does not take into account these factors, instead he implicitly criticizes eating the horse and camel meat only on the grounds that Westerners are not in the habit of eating it and their digestive systems will not be successful in digesting it, "to our digestion like a weight of lead" (Vambery, 1868, p.118). In fact, in dealing with this culinary sign he foregrounds his cultural baggage and operates on the basis of it, as a result, he mistranslates culturally.

Tayammum

Lastly, Vambery as a cultural translator in his travel in Central fails to capture the essence of tayammum, a cultural/religious sign. In fact, he cannot penetrate to its signifier (its physical dimension) and signified (its meaning behind it). As to this cultural /religious sign, the travel writer keeps silent about its importance in Koran. According to Koran, Muslims are required to perform it where there is not any clean water nearby for making their Wudu, ablution, so that they will not miss saying their prayers on its due time. In this case they make it by placing their hands to clean rock, stone, or dust, and then rubbing them to their hands and faces, "ye find not water, then go to clean high ground and rub your faces and your hands with some of it" (5:6). Given his first encounter with the sign in question, he experiences it in an inhospitable desert on their way to Khiva when his Muslim fellow travelers halt to perform it in the eve of Eid Ul-Adha. Since he has disguised himself as a pious dervish, he is forced to do it. From his perspective, tayammum is going through an absurd Islamic ritual which only makes the body filthier, thereby unhygienic and unhealthy, "all my comrades were disfigured by Teyemmun [tayammum] for believers are required to wash themselves with dust and sand, so render them *dirtier*" (Vambery, 1963, p.117). With regard to his statement about this religious sign, he turns back to his cultural baggage since he translates/ interoperates the sign in the light of Victorian hygiene discourse. In other words, that it is not compatible with the Victorian concept of sanitation, the travel writer depreciates it and mistranslates it as a dirty activity. He could translate it correctly if he looks at it from the standpoint of Koran. According to it, Tayammum is an act of purification which God prescribes it for the ease of the Muslims in emergency cases, "Allah would not place a burden on you" (Glorious Koran, 5:6). Additionally, the Muslims look at the ritual as the sign of their devotion and respect to their God even in hard times not as polluting themselves with the dust and stone. Vambery in this regard reduces this cultural sign into a dirty act in the place of viewing and translates it in its context of Islamic culture by appreciating and acknowledging it which he could do it via purveying enough information about it. But his treatment of it is tantamount to the mistranslation of the sign.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Translation as the process of converting the signs of one context/source culture into another foreign context/ target culture is not confined solely to linguistic level. It takes places in other domains like travel writing as well. When a travel writer sets off to an alien zone/source, he encounters different cultural signs which he has to culturally translate them for his audience in the target culture. There are two available approaches for him to translate the cultural signs. Firstly, he can acknowledge the difference of the cultural signs in the source culture with those of home culture via providing enough information about them to obviate not only mistranslating the signs but also distorting them. Secondly, he can domesticate and tame the cultural signs by disregarding the difference between cultural contexts. Vambery in his voyage to Central Asia recourses to the second method when he treats three cultural signs: stoning, food and tayammum. He mistranslates them by failing to extricate himself from his cultural baggage which precludes him acknowledging, appreciating the signs under question, and highlighting their difference. As to stoning, he clings to his Western regime of signs/cultural baggage, and as a result he presents inaccurate information about it; he claims that just casting a glance on a fully veiled woman is sufficient for stoning the male viewer. His claim is inconsistent with Islamic sharia. With regard to the culinary sign, he translates eating camel and horse flesh as an unusual (and horrible) practice. Finally, concerning Tayammum he regards it a dirty ritual, while the Muslim sees it as an expression their love to their God. That this sign does not fit into Victorian sanitation discourse, the travel writer rejects it as filthy act.

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