Identity in Translation: A Cultural Analysis of Anton's The Corpse Washer

Falah Hussein Hanoon Al-Sari

Iraq , Missan,University of Missan

college of Basic education

falahhhalsarri@uomisan.edu.iq

https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3295-3281

Abstract:

This research paper investigates the multifaceted concept of identity as it is represented through translation in Antoon's self-translated novel, *The Corpse Washer* (2011) for which Antoon was awarded a prestigious prize for being invisible and fluent as a self-translator. By foreignizing the cultural items in the novel, Antoon has made himself visible by employing the Arabic language as reservoir of memory in which he is tied emotionally and culturally to his country of origin, Iraq. Set against the backdrop of post-war Iraq, the novel explores themes of cultural identity, displacement, and selfhood as experienced by its characters. This study aims to analyze how the process of translation affects the portrayal of these identity elements, examining the cultural factors preserved or altered in the translated text. Through a mixed approach that combines qualitative textual analysis, comparative studies, and insights from translation theory, the research highlights the complexities of translating cultural elements and their implications for understanding identity in a wider context. By engaging with the larger socio-political landscape of Iraq, this paper seeks to contribute to the fields of translation studies and cultural analysis, underscoring the significance of translation as a means of cultural exchange that shapes narratives of identity and belonging.

Key words: identity, Literary translation, domestication, foreignization.

المستخلص

تستكشف هذه الورقة البحثية المفهوم متعدد الأوجه للهوية كما يتم تمثيله من خلال الترجمة في رواية "
The Corpse Washer" (٢٠١١) التي ترجمها أنطون بنفسه، والتي حصل على جائزة مرموقة لكونه
مترجمًا لبقا متخفيا وراء الترجمة ببراعة. من خلال ابقاء العناصر الثقافية الأجنبية في الرواية
(Foreignization) ظهرت شخصية أنطون كمترجم بتوظيف اللغة العربية كمصدر للذاكرة، والتي
يرتبط بها عاطفيًا وثقافيًا مع بلده الأصلي، العراق. ولتكون خلفية الرواية هي العراق ما بعد الحرب،
تستكشف الرواية موضوعات الهوية الثقافية والتهجير والذات كما يختبرها شخصياتها. تهدف هذه الدراسة
إلى تحليل كيف تؤثر عملية الترجمة على تصوير هذه العناصر المرتبطة بالهوية، مع دراسة العوامل
الثقافية التي تم الحفاظ عليها أو تعديلها في النص المترجم. من خلال نهج مختلط يجمع بين التحليل
النصي النوعي والدراسات المقارنة والرؤى في نظريات الترجمة المختلفة، تبرز هذه الدراسة تعقيدات
ترجمة العناصر الثقافية وانعكاساتها لفهم الهوية في سياق أوسع. من خلال التفاعل مع المشهد
الاجتماعي والسياسي الأوسع في العراق، تسعى هذه الورقة للمساهمة في مجالات دراسات الترجمة
والتحليل الثقافي، مؤكدةً على أهمية الترجمة كوسيلة للتبادل الثقافي التي تشكل روايات الهوية والانتماء.
الكلمات الدالة: identity, Literary translation, domestication, foreignization

Research Statement

This research paper navigates the notion of identity as represented in Anton's novel *The Corpse Washer* (2010). It explores how the translated text conveys the cultural representation embedded within the original text in the socio-cultural and historical context of post-war Iraq. Consequently, this research underlines the way translation affects the portrayal of identity. The analysis will highlight the complexities of cultural identity shedding light on associated notions of displacement and selfhood.

Research Methodology

This study combines qualitative textual analysis with insights from translation theory, namely cultural translation, to provide a textual analysis of both the original Arabic text and its translated version to identify the cultural

references and shifts related to identity. Those cultural references and shifts in the source text will be compared with the target text to analyze how translation choices reflect or alter character identities and cultural contexts in light of cultural translation theories, especially Lawrence Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignization, to critique the strategies employed in the translation process.

Research Objectives

This research explores the Translation techniques and strategies employed in *The Corpse Washer* to understand how they influence the representation of identity and cultural elements. It also explores how the portrayal of identity in the novel is informed by the socio-political and historical context of post-war Iraq. Therefore, this research identifies and assesses the cultural references in both the original and translated texts, highlighting what is preserved or lost through the translation process. By providing a detailed analysis of how translation can alter or preserve identities, this research enriches the understanding of cultural exchange in translation studies and literature.

Research Significance

This research contributes to the fields of translation studies and cultural analysis. It illuminates the critical role translation plays in shaping narratives of identity. It addresses the gaps in existing literature on translation's impact on cultural identity, particularly within Middle Eastern contexts. This research will foster a greater appreciation for the complexities of translation as a means of cultural exchange, emphasizing the significance of understanding identity in the context of war and aftermath in Iraq. Furthermore, it will engage with the implications of these findings for translators reinforcing the importance of identity in the translation process.

Research Questions

This research paper answers the following questions:

1. How does the process of translation shape the representation of identity in *The Corpse Washer*?

2. What cultural elements are preserved or altered in the translation, and how do these changes impact the understanding of identity?

3. In what ways does the translation reflect the broader socio-political context of Iraq, and how does this context influence character identities?

1.1 Introduction

Contemporary Iraqi novels after the American-led invasion seem to be characterized by manifestations of brutality in terms of both themes and characters. They reflect the outcomes of political oppression and imprisonment practiced by the Baathist regime resulting in the dominance of themes of alienation and fragmentation. Violence did not end after the invasion, so most Iraqi narratives highlight terror and death as central to the Iraqi life which became full of kidnapping and suicidal bombing. Blasim's *The Iraqi Christ*, Sadaawy's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, and Anton's *The Corpse Washer* all centralize death as the core element of their Gothic-like narrative. Death in such narratives is introduced as related to public places and events which stretches the notion of terror to everyday life.

Sinan Antoon is an Iraqi novelist, poet and essayist. Anton's *The Corpse Washer* is his third novel which appeared first in Arabic as *The pomegranate's Alone* (or Wahdaha Shajarat al-Roman) in 2010, then he translated it into English. The novel was longlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2014 and won the 2014 Arab American Book Award given by the Arab American National Museum. Antoon left Iraq after the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, then revisited the country after 2003. He is among the few exiled writers who were against the decision of the American-led war against Iraq in 2003. War, for him, brings more destruction than any promised peace. When he was asked about what he saw in Iraq, Antoon said: "now we had

entered the stage of total destruction to erase Iraq once and for all" (Antoon, 2014, p. 85).

In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon uses different images of verbal violence to express the depth of the sufferings of civilians and the true call for help. Suffering, as he suggests, is not the product of this particular moment, instead it is the accumulations of previous decades. Through the use of gothic-like fiction strategies in *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon deploys a frank treatment of reality and the annihilation of the human soul using images of daily violence on corpses. Anton's *The Corpse Washer* (2010) employs the theme of death as a critique of the regime before the war. In this novel, death is not merely a visitor but rather a hungry consumer of lives. The novel tells the story of Jawad, a descendant of a Shiite corpse washing family, living in Bagdad. Jawad is the symbol of young men suffering both before and after the war.

Jawad is aware of artistic talent and wants to be an artist, however, his father wants him to continue the work of the family as corpse washer, especially after the death of his brother. Jawad does not like his father's job, and he is even afraid of dead bodies. Jawad's horror is depicted with the nightmare in which he sees his beloved Reem who left him because of cancer. Reem appears asking him to wash her body, but eventually a group of masked men appear to beat Jawad and kidnap Reem. Jawad realizes that death is chasing him even in his sleep "as if the awakening contact never enough to it. Is not sufficient that I spent my whole day taking care of its guests and preparing them to lay in his lap" (8-9).

1.2 A Cultural Turn in Translation

Literary translation is not merely dependent on the translator's linguistic skills and accuracy, but it also involves a concise understanding and rendering of other aspects that affect the understanding of the source text, including the sociocultural, historical, religious, and geopolitical elements. Using Anton's, *The Corpse Washer* as a case study, this research claims that a translator

should have multicultural knowledge and understanding of both source and target cultures: Arabic and English. Merely linguistic-oriented approaches in translation would affect the delivery of the historical and cultural significance of the original. In his *The Scandals of Translation* (1998), Lawrence Venuti claims that "translation research and translation training have been impeded by the prevalence of linguistics-oriented approaches that offer a truncated view of the empirical data they collect" (1).

The linguistic-oriented approaches focus mainly on locating the differences that exist between source and target languages and negotiating the linguistic complexities that might appear. Therefore, in linguistic-oriented approaches, literary translation is more successful when there is enough similarity between the two linguistic systems. For Anton Povic, in his essay *The Concept Shift of Expression*, the translation process is not merely linguistic and has to confront the literary norms. Therefore, for Popvic, the changes that affect the original text are due to "the differences between the two languages" and they "determine the major components of the translation's structure, the integrative principle of its development which we label style" (79). This research, therefore, reinforces the significance and possibility of addressing other aspects of the translation process, including the cultural, religious, geopolitical, and social challenges while using Anton's *The Corpse Washer* as an example.

Unlike linguistic approaches to translation, the second half of the twentieth century has witnessed the emergence of significant contributions, both theoretical and methodological, within translation studies. The translation process no longer became concerned with the notion of 'fidelity' to the original text, or 'faithfulness' of the translated text. In other words, translation theories no longer neglect "all kinds of other aspects connected with the phenomenon of translation, a circumstance that could teach us many things about how cultures and literatures function" (Lefevere, 1992, p. 6). In his *Translation and*

the Creation of Images or Excuse me, Is this the Same Poem?, Lefevere further claims that the cultural aspect of translation has to be included in the translation process, or the translated text will not be integrated into the target culture. The translated text then must be received in a meaningful way by target readers (78). Therefore, the cultural element of translation is a key factor in determining the value of translation, rather than the translation's faithfulness to the original.

The 'cultural turn' as a term was first introduced in 1990 by Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere in their work *Translation, History and Culture*. It became a key term used in translation studies afterward to refer to "the move towards the analysis of translation from a cultural studies angle" which determines —the move from translation as text to translation as culture and politics" (Munday, 2001, p. 126). As Segupta argues, this turn has become concerned with analyzing both source and target cultures to "bring into focus the position of a translated text within the intersecting networks of a culture" (p. 159). The culture of the source text is the most important to consider during the translation process. Moreover, Susan Bassnett in her work titled *Translation Studies* also reinforces the importance of considering the culture of the source text during the translation since "language is the heart within the body of culture … so the translator cannot treat the text in isolation from the culture" (14). Language cannot be isolated from its culture since the culture is what has shaped the language and constructed it in the first place.

The cultural turn was motivated by the notion of 'interdisciplinary' and its call for the exchange of ideas across disciplinary boundaries. By the 1990s, 'interdiciplinarity' became "the hallmark and guiding principle of translation studies" (Hanna, 2006, p. 12, Hanna, 2016, p. 2). Against this backdrop, it was during the 1990s that the concern of research in translation studies moved from the 'textual' to the 'cultural'—a paradigmatic shift described by Lefevere and Bassnett (1990, p.1) as the 'cultural turn' in translation studies.

This shift marks a significant break from the traditional paradigms that had long dominated the field of translation and was reflected in challenges to their mechanisms and key methods of analysis as well as their objects of study. That is, reaching the understanding that the translation process is not only about the text and that translation is not an isolated discipline, but, rather, an interdisciplinary field with a 'chameleon quality' that is 'able to change its color and shape, to translate itself into many different things' (Bassnett, 1998, p.26), marks the paradigmatic shift from the textual to the cultural in translation studies.

Cultural approaches to translation have managed to extend the disciplinary perspective to accommodate the historical and cultural contexts, besides the text itself, by accepting the idea that nothing exists in isolation and that the meaning of anything is always determined by its context (Asad, 1986, p.148). By the same token, Lefevere and Bassnett (1990, p.11) state that here is always a context in which the translation takes place, always a history from which a text emerges and into which a text is transposed'. Similarly, Venuti (1995, p.18) emphasizes that 'the viability of a translation is established by its relationship to the cultural and social conditions under which it is produced and read'. Wolf (2002a, p.34) also argues that any translation is by default bound up with social contexts. All this seems to have helped open new means of evaluating the process(es) of translation which focuses on power relations inherent in any translation activity (Wolf, 2006b, p.9).

However, the main weakness in the cultural approaches to translation is that rather than delving into the extra- textual social contexts in which the translation process takes place, they tend to remain confined to the 'hermeneutics of the text' (Inghilleri, 2005a, p.134). The need to surpass the purely culturally oriented 'hermeneutic' understanding of translation has shifted the attention of research in translation studies to socio-oriented approaches.

1.3 Cultural Constraints in Translation

As Bassnett puts it in *Translation Studies*, it is important realize that "exact reproduction is impossible, since the worlds in which the original text and its translations are produced are inevitably different worlds" (1). Therefore, in such a situation, according to Bassnett in her introduction to her other work entitled *Essays and Studies: Translating Literature*, the translator has to "mediate between those two different moments in time and space and to produce a text that exists in a relationship with both" (1). So, the literary translation will never be an exact replica, but through attempting to translate from a cultural-oriented perspective along with locating the different challenges that could exist, translators can be more successful in producing faithful translations of the source texts that could be better received in the target culture.

It is then important to consider the possible challenges during any literary translation and specifically cross-cultural ones. Indeed, Itamar Evan-Zohar in his essay titled *The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem*, states that "translation is no longer a phenomenon whose nature and borders are given once and for all, but an activity dependent on the relations within a certain cultural system" (qtd. in Munday 124). In the same way that the writers of the original literary text are influenced by their culture, the translators are also influenced and actually more governed by their cultures. In the same vein, Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere in their preface to *Translation, History and Culture,* point out that the translators are constrained by their own cultures with all of the ideologies these cultures determine since "all rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way" (ii).

2. Identity translation in *The Corpse Washer*

The identity debate has occupied a prominent place in the present age and the questions of ethnicity, location, and nationality have gained a central position. The formation of an identity carries with it the baggage of many parameters and it is not easy to isolate the process of identity formation from the cultural, political and locational components related to it. Since Sinan Antoon is both the writer and the translator, it adds to the authenticity of the translation process, especially in terms of authorial intention. Anton's personal identity and cultural background influence the narrative in *The Corpse Washer* reveals deep connections between the author, the characters, and the cultural context of the story. The cultural elements that represent the notion of identity in the novel include cultural-specific and religious expressions.

The representation of sociopolitical upheavals and death along with other themes are at the core of *The Corpse Washer*. Death appears through the eyes of the broken and destroyed self of Jawad:

> Death is not content with what it takes from me in my waking hours, it insists on haunting me even in my sleep. Isn't it enough that I toil all day tending to its eternal guests, preparing them to sleep in its lap? Is death punishing me because I thought I could escape its clutches? (13).

Jawad is an insider to the world of death and an eyewitness on all the sufferings of those corpses. While the text tracks the life journey of Jawad, from childhood into adulthood, it also tracks his career transition from an artist into a corpse washer. In the same way it tracks death and its transformation over the period of war and political unrest in Iraq. Moreover, violence and death run from the Iraqi battlefield into streets with the eruption of the sectarian war, then into the human bodies. Both violence and death continue their journey into his own life and dreams, leaving him isolated and

traumatized. In this text we see Jawad giving up the job of his dreams, losing his beloved and imprisoning himself in his father's shop.

2.1 Translating Cultural-specific Expressions

The notion of cultural identity is connected to the self-translation practice in which the translation aims to preserve the cultural identity in the source text and make it accessible to the target audience. Literary translations from Arabic into English have usually been characterized by several translation strategies, especially domestication in which translators tend to be invisible achieving fluency accepted by the target audience. In its simple form, cultural identity is seen as one's sense of belonging to a particular culture or group. For Hall (1990), cultural identity in a shared culture provides stable and consistent reference and meaning. However, Hall views cultural identity as always becoming since it is the "whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence" (Hall, 1990, p. 237).

Cultural identity is realized in *The Corpse Washer* by the use of culture-specific items throughout the novel. The following excerpt shows how Sinan Antoon's use of literal translation can be seen as a deliberate strategy that has several implications for the narrative and its cultural context. However, translating the religion-specific term " غسلني " which is translated into "wash" represents a cultural loss since the Arabic term is related to ritualistic implications that are not included in the English verb:

– ريم! شتسوين هنا

– كنت على وشك أن أحتضنها وأقبلها، لكنها حذرتني:

– لا تبوسني. غسلني أول حتى نكون سوية وبعدين . . .

– شنو؟ بس بعدج طيبة. ليش أغسلج؟

– غسلني حتى نكون سوية. اشتاقيتلك هواية.

– بس انتي مو ميتة؟

–غسلني حبيبي. غسلني حتى نصير سوية.

– إبيش؟ ماكو شي هنا؟

– غسلني حبيبي (٨)

''Reem, what are you doing here?''

I am about to hug and kiss her, but she warns me: ''Don't kiss me.

Wash me first so we can be together and then . . . ''

''What? You are still alive?''

''Wash me so we can be together. I missed you so much.''

''But you are not dead!''

''Wash me, darling . . . Wash me so we can be together.''

''With what? There is nothing here.''

''Wash me, darling.'' (11)

Moreover, the sentence "Wash me so we can be together" does not necessarily show the implied meaning which is religious. The Arabic sentence is clearer and explains the importance of why a dead body must be washed. This cause–and–effect relationship is not fully rendered in Antoon's literal translation strategy. Moreover, another cultural loss, although inevitable, is the vernacular use of language in the original text which is transferred into standard English. The following excerpt is another example:

_ بابا يئذي الناس؟

- لا إبني. بالعكس. ليش هيجي تكول؟

- مو هذا الرجال هناك جان كاعد يبجي؟

- إي، بس مو من ورا أبوك. هذا مقهور.

- ليش مقهور؟ شيسون جوة؟ (١٤)

''Does Father hurt people?''

''No son, not at all. It's quite the opposite. Why do you ask?''

''But wasn't that man there crying?''

''Yes, but not because of your father. He's just sad.''

''Why is he sad? What are they doing inside?'' (16)

The use of Iraqi dialect is a key element of identity in the novel. However, there is no way to preserve it in translation. Therefore, Antoon resorted to the linguistic equivalence. The following excerpt is another example in which Antoon resorts to literal translation to preserve the meaning of the original. However, it contains cultural references that cannot be delivered in English. For example, the word التيمم is a religious word that relates to Islamic religious culture, and it has no linguistic or cultural equivalence in English. Therefore, Antoon instead explains what the word means to make the meaning accessible to the target reader:

- وإذا لم يكن هناك ماء، فهز رأسه وابتسم قائلا: "هاي شجابها ببالك؟" ثم قال "التيمم." سألته عن سبب ذلك، فقال إن أصل الحياة هو الماء والتراب وعند عدم وجود الماء للوضوء او الغسل يمكن استخدام التراب الطاهر. (٣٧)

- . . .

- وقال ان في المغيسل ثلاث خزانات ماء على السطح يضخ اليها الماء من مضخة تحسبا لانقطاعه في حالات الطوارئ.

He shook his head and smiled: "Wash with clean sand or dust.''
I asked why, and he said that the origin of life is water and dust and if there is no water for ablution or washing, then pure earth can be used.
I asked whether he ever had to wash someone like that— without water. He said that the *mghaysil* had three water tanks on the roof in case there was a water shortage. (25)

Following the same technique, Antoon preserves the cultural identity of the original by providing the linguistic equivalence to the religious terms:

- عيب ابني، الأموات الهم حرمة! إرسم أبوك، إرسم حمودي شكد ماتريد، بس عوف الأموات بحالهم!

- . . .

- لا تجذب! هيانة نايم على الدجة! (٤٤)

Once, father got very angry when he found out that I was sketching the face of a dead man he'd washed just that morning. He scolded me: "Shame on you! The dead have their sanctity. Draw your father or you Hammoudy as much as want but leave the dead in peace'!

. . .

''Don't lie! Here he is lying on the washing bench!''

Antoon's translation then interweaves Arabic with English at the same time that it offers reflections on the relationship between the two languages. *The Corpse Washer* thus frequently poses questions about the intertwined history of the Arabic and English languages, highlighting the ways that the Arabic and English cultures are negotiated. Moreover, the previous excerpts show how much Antoon was concerned with producing an accessible version of the original text, more than providing all cultural factors and parameters. Yet, his use of foreignization and transliteration preserves the cultural and linguistic identity of the source text:

While foreignization and transliteration create challenges for the target readers, they can also provide a more authentic and immersive reading experience. Afterall, foreignization is a translation strategy that aims to retain the foreignness of the source text in the translation, rather than domesticating it to fit the cultural norms and language of the target audience. This is obvious in maintaining the transliterated term المغيسل which does not exist as a cultural element in English. While this approach seeks to preserve the cultural, linguistic, and stylistic features of the source text, they may be challenging for the target audience.

Another translation strategy which Antoon used in the previous excerpt is ellipsis. The use of ellipsis can introduce an element of ambiguity, inviting

readers to interpret the unexpressed thoughts or emotions of characters. This can deepen engagement with the text as readers fill in the gaps with their own understanding. In the Arabic text, Jawad is shown what النيمم is, and his father performs some actions that explain the ritual. However, this part is omitted, and it does not exist in the English version. Antoon seems to have thought that this cultural and religious ritual would not be understood by the target audience. Yet, the use of ellipsis serves as a powerful strategy that enhances the narrative's emotional depth and cultural resonance. By selectively omitting details, he creates space for ambiguity and reflection, allowing readers to engage more fully with the themes of loss, identity, and cultural dislocation. This approach not only preserves the original's essence but also invites readers into a more intimate connection with the characters and their experiences.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of *The Corpse Washer* by Sinan Antoon, this study investigated the literary strategies employed and their efficacy in negotiating the relationship between language, culture and identity. Through an examination of the original text of the novel, alongside its translation, this study argues that this novel represents a unique cultural identity which is characterized using Iraqi vernacular and dialectical expressions as well as religious themes and sayings. Like the original, the translated text thematizes questions of migration and cultural belonging through narrative. Employing frameworks derived from translation theory, this study spotted paratextual elements such as ellipsis, and the many strategies employed, including transliteration and dynamic equivalence. Antoon's use of transliteration demonstrates that these transliterated expressions are significantly part of the Arabic cultural identity.

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