

International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies

ISSN: 2308-5460



Domestication and Mistranslation of Oriental Jewelries and Music in Edmond O'Donovan's *The Merv Oasis*

[PP: 64-68]

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ABSTRACT

From the perspective of a translation scholar like Susan Bassnett, travel writing is not dissimilar to translation. Like a translator, travel writer translates his traversed culture (i.e., target culture) for the consumption of his/her home readership. Similar to textual translation, this cultural translation can be either successful or doomed, contingent on the travel writer cum cultural translator's translation: does he/she translate on the basis of foreignization or domestication or mistranslate? The current article draws on Bassett's cultural translation theory as its analytical tool and applies to Edmond O'Donovan's travelogue, *The Merv Oasis* to illustrate how this travel writer as a cultural translator in his journey to Oriental locus both domesticates and mistranslate his encountered culture in particular his female travelees' jewelries as well as their very indigenous music.

Keywords: *Cultural Translations, Foreignization, Domestication, Mistranslation, Jewelries, Music*

ARTICLE INFO	The paper received on	Reviewed on	Accepted after revisions on
	12/02/2017	03/03/2017	20/03/2017

Suggested citation:

Gholi, A. & Ahmadi, M. (2017). Domestication and Mistranslation of Oriental Jewelries and Music in Edmond O'Donovan's *The Merv Oasis*. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*. 5(1), 64-68.

1. Introduction

In the height of political rivalry between the Tsarist Russia and England over taking the control of Central Asia, and when the Russian troop are advancing to invade and possess Turkomania, the Daily Mail sends Edmond O'Donovan, its Irish war correspondent, to Gok Depe, where indigenous Turkmens are fighting with their Russian foes, to report the Russians' expansion in that region. To do so, initially he travels to Persia. Afterwards he departs to Khorasan, a region between Turkomania and Persia. Unable to enter the battleground due to the Russians' ban, he instead journeys to Merv, a region in Turkomania, which is unaffected by the war yet. There, Merv dwellers arrest him, thinking him as a Russian spy. When they realize that he is related to England, they give him limited freedom, and even appoint him as one of their important council members to take this crucial decision whether to accept Russians' sovereignty or resist against them and preserve their independence. Turkmens are reluctant to set O'Donovan free because they believe that his presence has been not only auspicious but also effective in postponing the Russians' advancement to their region. In contrast to the Turkmens,

O'Donovan is hankering for leaving the region, and this opportunity to escape from his honorable captivity from his travelees arises when the Turkmen sends him to Tehran to elicit help from the Persian and the English. As soon as he leaves there, never does he look back. During his stay in Merv, he is the observer of his travelees' mores and customs as well as their quotidian life. In 1824, he publishes his experiences and observations in the form of a travelogue entitled, *Merv Oasis*. Just as many travel books written in the Victorian Age, O' Donovan's travel book is not free from Orientalist, biased and jaundiced view, and this undermines its reliability and authenticity. In this regard, to illustrate the travel writer's erroneous perception of his travelees and their culture, the current article builds on cultural translation theory especially when he domesticates and mistranslate his travelees' jewelries and music.

2. Theoretical Background

Inspired by Saussure's structuralism, Clifford Geertz equates culture with text (Hoffman, 2009). Building on Geertz's view, Susan Bassnett (2004) draws an analogy between translation and

travel writing since journey is involved in both them,

The translator explores a text written another time and place and brings back his or her version of that explanatory process in the form of translation. The travel writer produces a different kind of translation, a version of journey that he or she claims to have undertaken (p.70).

Later Bassnett expands her idea and argues that a travel writer is a cultural translator that makes the portraits of other cultures (Scholl, 2009). Optimistically like a textual translator, a travel writer through mediating between the home and the source culture endeavors to clear up cultural misunderstandings and present an authentic image of the source culture (Ibid.) yet this ideal is not easy to attain due to the hampering function of what Bourdieu calls 'habitus': individually acquired disposition and 'field': institutional and social conditions in which the travel writer operates (Howells & Negreiros, 2012).

Bassnett (2004) distinguishes two types of translations: foreignization and domestication which correspond with two groups of travel writers: cosmopolitan and colonial (Gholi, 2016). When the translator opts for translation on the basis of foreignization, he is burdened to "find ways of signaling the distinctly different features of source [text] in translation... [and] highlight[ing] the intrinsic difference between source and target texts" (Bassnett, 2004, p.72). In fact, in this translation the translator foregrounds the source text, but backgrounds the target text, and here his translation is equal to respecting Other/the source text. This acknowledgement of difference has prompted postcolonial critics to acclaim and propose it as a fit and ethical choice for translation (ibid.). This translator bears resemblance to the cosmopolitan travel writer who is not only empathetic and receptive towards the source culture but also cognizant and appreciative of its difference (Lisle, 2007). In marked contrast, when the translator domesticates the source text, he strips the foreignness off the source text and bestows upon it normalcy via linguistic manipulation (Bassnett, 2004). Indeed, in domestication, the translator brings to a fore the target text and pushes that of the source to the background which is equivalent to colonizing the source text or exalting Self/the target text and depreciating the Other/the source text. In addition, in his domestication, the travel writer reduces indigenous cultural objects into something

funny and inferior. Thus he automatically commits cultural Othering. This explains why cultural domestication has aroused the ire of postcolonial critics. Bassnett (2004) notes that this kind of translation is popular among English Language translators. The domesticating translator is not unlike the colonial the travel writer in whose works "difference in any form is domesticated" (Lisle, 2007).

3. Textual Analysis

Domestication and Mistranslation of Turkmen Female Travelees' Jewelries
Bilezigi gertriň, / Bring the bracelet to me,
Ak bilege ötüriň, /Put it on my white wrist.
Janym çykyp baradyr / My soul dies of
impatience,
Söwer ýara ýetriň / Take me to my loved one
 (A short Turkmen folk song about jewelry, Blackwell, 2001, p.136)

In our culture we have such a respect for musical instruments, they are like part of God.

- (Ravi Shanker)

As a cultural translator in his journey to Merv, Edmond O'Donovan fails to adopt a cosmopolitan approach and to translate his traveled culture based on foreignization. Conversely, like a colonial travel writers he not only domesticate but also mistranslate cultural signs of his travelees namely their female jewelries, musical instrument along with bakhshies, Turkmen singers.

4. Indigenous Jewelries

Given Jewelry, the travel writer disrespectfully domesticates female Turkmen travelees when he eyes Gul Jamal, his hostess, entering the home to announce that the dinner is ready,

Around her neck was a ponderous collar resembling that of *Newfoundland dog* [breed of a large dog used as working dog], and from it, suspended by numerous was engraved plate chased with gold and arabesque and set with cornelians [reddish translucent gemstone], not unlike *urim and thummim* [sacred oracles worn] by a Jewish priests. On her wrists were *ponderous* bracelets set also with flat cornelians. The breast and stomach of the shirt were so set over with closely-hung large silver coins as to give her appearance of wearing a *cuirass [armor] scales*. On her head was *casque* [knight's helmet] of open silver work, showing the red cloth beneath, and surmounted by a *spike* like that of *German soldier's helmet*. Her entire appearance was in her silver panoply [armor and dress] *Minerva-like* [Warrior-Goddess] in extreme...The Yamud [one of main Turkmen tribe] women wear a *fearful head covering* of the size and shape of ordinary hand-box...anything *more awkward, more unbecoming or more generally ungraceful, it would be difficult to image* ...the Merv women



also wore same *abomination* (emphasis added 1883, pp. 261-262).

In the above passage, the domestication of Oriental jewelries takes place when the travel writer intermixes Western culture with that of the Orient by finding similarity between Gul Jamal's close-fitting necklace with the collar of a Newfoundland dog, her gold chased plate decorated with arabesque and cornelians with the breastplate of Jewish priests, and her decorative crown with the German soldiers' helmet. To complete the domestication, he claims that his hostess's jewelries renders her to Minerva, the Goddess-warrior. Here travel writer in his cultural translation both foregrounds his cultural baggage and prioritizes the needs of his readers since in selecting his similes (including dogs' color, helmets, Jewish plates, and Minerva), he resorts on the objects with which the cultural repertoire of his Western audience are already familiar. By doing so, he not only utilizes the cultural signs to entertain his fun-seeking audience, but also confiscates the nuance and complexity from the Oriental jewelries and treats them as if they were normal and even inferior objects in their target culture. Indeed, the travel writer taints his cultural translation with his contempt for his Turkmen women's ornaments because he does not perceive any artistic beauty and appeal in these objects. Instead, he implies that they are well suited for dogs, soldiers, and Jewish priests but not for women. Here domestication is not dissimilar to cultural Othering because the travel writer cum cultural translator (2004) appropriates it as an instrument to consolidate the superiority of his home culture and the inferiority of the source culture.

In addition to domestication his female travellee's jewelries, the travel writer insensitively mistranslates them. According to Mary Louise Pratt (2002) successful translation happens when the translator puts into question his own cultural imagination that is his 'field' and 'habitus'. In the selected extract, the travel writer who assumes the mantle of a colonial travel writer/cultural translator in lieu of fulfilling the requirements of a good translation, he arrogantly acts on the basis of his cultural imagination/heritage. His mistranslation occurs when he evacuates his female travellee's jewelries from their cultural, aesthetic, and practical meanings and filling it with his negative appellations like ponderous, abomination, ungraceful, fearful, and unbecoming while in the

context of Oriental Turkmen culture, the jewelries for Turkmen women have different significance and functions which he fails to mention them,

In Turkmen society, jewelry served several functions. Its precious metal (silver) and semi-precious stones (carnelian was the favored gem) served as a tangible and convertible form of wealth, which in hard times could be sold or pawned to help the tribe or family. Jewelry was also a form of conspicuous consumption and an indication of status that proclaimed the wealth and prosperity of its wearer. Equally important in traditional Turkmen society was the apotropaic, or protective, power ascribed to jewelry—shiny silver, bright red or blue stones, and tinkling pendants were thought to protect against the malign influence of evil and envious spirits. Girls wore jewelry from an early age; it was thought to promote fertility and good health, and was given as gifts on important occasions, such as religious holidays and celebrations of rites of passage (Ekhtiar & Moore, 2012, p.197).

Moreover, Diba (2011) highlights the other roles the jewelries play in Turkmen culture,

The parure [matching set of ornaments and jewelry] was an indicator of woman's ethnic identity and stage of life. Her jewelry varied according to her age and marital status, identifying her as a young girl, newly married, and it became increasingly elaborate as she became older. Jewelry played an important role in Turkmen wedding ceremony not only to adorn bride...another significant function of silver ornament was its use as portable money; many accounts describe moving scenes of Turkmen women divesting themselves of their precious jewelry to ensure survival of their tribe (p. 36).

The above passages clearly point that travel writer has failed in his cultural translation.

5. Indigenous Music

With regard to Turkmen Music, the travel writer repeats the domestication and mistranslation of this cultural sign, and this takes places when his narration focuses on *dutar*,

The only other instrument I ever saw used by the Turcomans, Tekke or otherwise...was the *dutar*, which exactly resembles a *medieval lute*...It is usually played to accompany some of the *wild recitative chants* [by bakhshi/Turkmen singer] *which pass for singing in this part of the word* (emphasis added, 1888, pp.302-303).

In the above extract, the travel writer once more in his cultural translation of Turkmen *dutar* accentuates his attachment to home culture because he equates the *dutar* with the medieval lute. By so doing, he robs its cultural uniqueness and

identity and permits the medieval lute to overshadow it. When his domestication is looked from another perspective, one can perceive that the travel writer's priority is culturally satisfying his home audience because his cultural domestication enables him to make the consumption and digestion of this cultural sign enjoyable and easy experience for his readers.

The travel writer in addition mistranslates the artistic status of the Turkmen singer, known as *bakhshi* among the Turkmen, when he alleges that his singing is nothing more than wild chants. Here he covertly conveys that the Bakhshi's songs are accepted as singing only in Central Asia while in the West they will not be regarded as singing. Here he implies that they are not as harmonic as the Western songs, thus they will fail to live to the Western singing standards. Again his cultural heritage in this section interferes and prevents him from seeing the bakhshi from the perspective of his travelers. In the eyes of the Turkmen, the bakhshies have honorable position in their society since they have been expressing and the dreams, desires, and grievances of the ordinary people, as well as in preserving their culture and customs through singing the epic of legendary *Goerogly*, stories from *Dede Korkut*, and in particularly the poems of *Magtynguly Fragi*, along with inspiring the bravery among the youth to defend their country against alien invaders (Abasov, 2005 & 2007)). Moreover, in the past like shamanisms, they used their songs to heal the sick and supplicate rain during drought (Kakaee, 2015). Finally, their songs contributed to Sufism by providing songs for the Sufis so that they can experience spiritual rapture (Sultanova, 2011). But the travel writer's cultural translation does not even point to these facts, and his cultural blindness clearly shows that his cultural translation is shallow and borders on cultural disrespect.

6. Conclusion

Translation as converting signs from source text to that of target can take place at the level of culture as well. For instance, when a travel writer moves to another cultural domain i.e., another cultural domain like the Orient, he acts like a cultural translator or as a cultural mediator between the source and target culture. His/her cultural transition can be either successful or unsuccessful, depending on the travel writer cum cultural translator's outlook towards the target culture and his/her travelers. If he keeps his

cultural baggage at bay and adopts a cosmopolitan approach, his cultural translation will be successful. This type of translation is called foreignization. This translation indeed is equal to displaying respect to indigenous culture and people. In contrast, when the travel writer cannot disrupt his attachment to his cultural baggage, his/her cultural translation is unsuccessful. In this kind of cultural translation which is called domestication, the cultural translator not only foregrounds his cultural baggage, but also employs top-down approach towards the target cultures and his encountered travelers. In addition, when the travel writer cum cultural translator exudes cultural blindness and insensitivity, he/she automatically perpetrates cultural mistranslation. With respect to Edmond O'Donovan, in his travel to the Oriental locus of Merv he fails to translate his target culture based on foreignization. Instead, he both domesticates and mistranslates when his cultural translation centers on his female travelers' jewelries and the indigenous Turkmen music. Concerning his female travelers' jewelries, he does not see any sign of beauty and artistic vitality but inferiority, and thus deems them suitable to be utilized for martial ends and keeping animals like dogs. Regarding Turkmen Dutar, a musical instrument, the travel writer pushes it into background by finding similarity between it and the Western medieval lute. He mistranslates indigenous Turkmen Bakhshi as well by devaluing his singing as inharmonic and harsh.

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