

Linguistic and Cultural Issues in Literary Translation A Case Study

Mohammed Albakry
Middle Tennessee State University

0. Introductory

This article is based on my translation of a collection of short stories “*A night in Casablanca*” by the late Moroccan writer Muhammad Zefzaf. The critical introduction offered here is informed by translating a number of his short stories. These short stories come from two of Zefzaf’s short collections (part 1 and part 2) published by the Moroccan Ministry of Cultural Affairs (Manshurat Wizarat Alsh’un Althakafi’ia) in 1999. The specific discussion of the translation process and its reconstruction, however, will revolve around only one of these short stories, namely *The Nests* (translated at the end of the article).

Zefzaf is well known in the Middle East, particularly in North Africa. Owing to the special cultural ties between France and North Africa, some of his works have been translated into French, but, in general, little is known about him in western languages.

Since the events of September 11, 2001, the western world has developed a consuming interest in Islamic life and culture. However, since then most that has been written about the Islamic World from the so-called experts on Islam and the Middle East-- who claim to tell us the real truth about Islam and its people-- has often focused on war, political turmoil, and religious conflict and has often been colored by ideological orientations.

As Edward Said (2002) points out, however, only good literature is particularly capable of dispelling “the ideological fogs” that has for so long surrounded the Middle East and obscured its people from the west. Said (2002: 74) argues that the west needs the kind of literature that can open up the world of Islam as pertaining to the living and the experienced rather than the ideological books that try to shut it down and stuff it into a box labeled “Dangerous—do not disturb.” Zefzaf’s stories are examples of that kind of literature.

Zefzaf’s stories, represented here by *The Nests*, offer a unique window into the commonplace, domestic life of ordinary people in a Muslim world steeped in its own context, unfiltered by western sensibilities. In his stories, we are able to see ordinary moments in the lives of ordinary characters unfold from the inside out. We see men and women who struggle to survive and understand the meaning of life in a culture startlingly different yet glowing with universal

glimpses of love, hate, jealousy, fear, cynicism, pathos, disappointment, regret, and bursts of insight into the human condition.

The ensuing sections focus on reconstructing the translation process by discussing the linguistic and cultural issues encountered in the original and how they were resolved in the translation.

1. Linguistic issues

1.1 Narrative style

Realism and attention to details in simple stark style characterize most of Zefzaf's stories and this aspect does not pose problems to the translator. In some of his stories, however, Zefzaf is more experimental in his use of literary styles. *The Nests*, for example, stylistically makes use of free direct style as a narrative technique. Congruent with this narrative style, Zefzaf probes into the character's multifarious thoughts and feelings without paying much attention to a narrative sequence since the emphasis is not so much on the external events as it is on the character's thought-events at a single moment. Particularly challenging from the translation point of view is handling the extensive use of free direct speech merged with the narration without any overt indication by a reporting clause or a switch to indirect speech. The following quote illustrates this point:

“He threw the letter under his feet and started to cry. How many nests were built and destroyed! My God! What can a man do with himself?”

Here we have a descriptive sentence prefaced by the narrator's third person pronoun “he” whereas the next exclamatory statement can be an expression of the character's consciousness or a commentary on this consciousness. The following question, however, starts with the first person possessive “my” in an exclamation phrase, an indication that the utterance represents the subjectivity of the narrated subject. In other words, two different subjects of consciousness are present at the same time, but how do we know whose perspective or subjectivity is represented at a specific point in the discourse? This is a question that the translator of this literary style has to face throughout the story.

The translation of literary style of this kind has to pay particular attention to certain linguistic uses. For example proximal deictic adverbs and demonstratives such as (*now, here, there, this, these*, etc) invite the inference of a speaking subjectivity. Other features like the use of third person pronouns and past tense suggest the presence of another voice (Wright 1995: 153). Zefzaf relays some of the subjective impressions of his nameless character through the consciousness of that character, and, at the same time by using the latter features, manages to maintain the narrator's perspective. Here is another example that illustrates this interaction or tension between the two perspectives:

He picks up radish roots, takes a drink and looks from behind the window at the vases of flowers and the couple of doves flying together in return to their place over the roof. *Maybe they have a nest there. Every couple above or under the earth builds some kind of nest for themselves, but it might get destroyed before they leave each*

other or after their deaths. Every nest is destined to be destroyed and people fight with all possible means to destroy their nests. But he is not positive what the two doves have on the roof, a nest, a hen, a cock or nothing. Whatever is hidden, no one else can know when it is hidden behind walls or barriers.

The initial narrator's stance is indicated by the use of the third person pronoun in the first two descriptive lines. In the following italic part, this presence is dominated by the character's perspective, at least in terms of the explicit features of narration. The passage, then, can be understood as expressing the narrated subject consciousness. However, the experience is not just narrated but also mediated by the narrator's didactic and intrusive presence. As typical in this style, the author in many parts of the story portrays the subjectivity of his character from the vantage perspective of the reporting narrator and, through a process of empathy, identifies himself with the character (see Brinton 1995:173-175).

1.2 Semantic prosody

Another area of sensitivity in the translation of this story is semantic or discourse prosody (Baker 2000; Stubbs 2001). This is the aura of meaning acquired by a lexical item "through its repeated association with other items in the language" (Baker 2000: 24) or "a feature which extends over more than one unit in a linear string" (Stubbs 2001: 65). The pivotal word *nest/s* in the translated story for example occurs 27 times and interacts with a number of different collocates mainly positive such as the adjective *happy* (5 times) and the verb *build* or *rebuild* (8 times). By looking at the textual environment of this word, however, we find that the author skillfully conveys a negative attitude towards its content by infusing it with irony and casting doubt on its traditionally pleasant connotations. Examples:

Keeping his *nest* so people could say he has a happy *nest*...What matters is that the *nest* is believed to be happy. Cheers to all, all is well...How many *nests* were built and destroyed.

The overall effect is that the idea of the nest is a mythical construct that people tenaciously believe in when they know that it is not true. The challenge of the translation here is to capture the tone, the discourse coherence and the attitudinal meaning served by this semantic prosody.

1.3 Syntax and punctuation

Zefzaf's use of Standard Arabic throughout his stories is a feature of his writing that facilitates the task of the translator. In spite of the Standard Arabic prose style, however, he could be a quirky writer especially in the areas of syntax and punctuation. The original literal arrangement of the clausal elements in the opening of the story reads as follow:

[He] sits by the window. [He] lonely looks at that bright sky. The sky might not be clear later. Some clouds or flocks of black birds might pass by. But he got used to all that.

In translation, these five sentences were compressed into two to produce an acceptable English text with flow:

Lonely he sits at the window looking at the bright blue sky. The sky might not be clear later when clouds or flocks of black birds pass by, but he got used to all that.

In many cases, for the sake of clarity, I needed to shorten and simplify without sacrificing the deliberately repetitive quality of the style. At different places in the story, moreover, there was a need to sacrifice some stylistic idiosyncrasies since these peculiarities were sometimes hard to preserve. Calquing too reverently or following the distinctive syntax too closely would have caused a lack of comprehensibility and yielded some unidiomatic results.

Another challenging task is the less standardized and more fluid nature of Arabic punctuation compared to English. The uses of commas, periods, and paragraphing in Arabic are more subject to the writer's discretion and do not necessarily have a one-to-one relationship with English. Moreover, a series of question marks and a combination of a question mark and an exclamation point is possible in Arabic to produce a dramatic effect. These conventions, or lack thereof, are capitalized on in Zefzaf's writing but they were normalized in the English translation so as not to violate the norms of the target language.

1.4 Grammatical gender

Finally, there is the issue of grammatical gender, which is more marked in Arabic, and how to render it into English. Gender distinctions operate massively and persistently in the Arabic language with the masculine being the unmarked form as opposed to the neutrality, or at least the apparent neutrality, in English. In reference to people, Zefzaf uses *man* and the generic *he*, as is the convention in Arabic. However, he makes a nod to the feminine pronoun in the following passage:

They try to give the impression that they live in happiness. They lie to themselves until the time people say God bless *his or her* soul.

This unusual nod, however, was not taken up after that and the Arabic text reverted back to the regular use of the "he-language." All the italicized references in the passage cited below contain overtly masculinized singular references in the Arabic original. In the English translation, however, I deemed it more appropriate and consistent with the spirit of the story to de-genderize and pluralize these references by adding the nominative pronoun "she" or using the objective and possessive pronouns "them" and "their" instead of "him" and "his." I considered it a safe option to use the pronoun "them" in the third line as a reference to the antecedent "deceased" in the second line, even though it might sound ungrammatical from a prescriptive point of view (that is if we consider the antecedent singular).

If *they* were well off, *they* would have a small obituary on a newspaper page written by a poor journalist reading: "The deceased (May he *or she* rest in peace) departed this world to be with God". But who gave *them* rest or peace? Only the One who can

give rest and peace and grant protection to the human soul knows why the lie of grieving the dead is over few days after *their* death, just as the lie of conjugal happiness is revealed in time.

2. Cultural issues

A literary translation is a device of art used to release the text from its “dependence on prior cultural knowledge” (Herzfeld 2003:110). However, it is not an easy task to transplant a text steeped in one culture into another. Particularly demanding from the translator's point of view is the use of culturally specific metaphors and allusions.

2.1 Metaphors

Zefzaf's use of metaphors is sparing and the few used pose no significant problems in translation. The italic noun phrase at the end of the following quotation might not be crystal clear but it is connotative and, therefore, was literally translated:

Always he sits there in the same place smoking, drinking, and trying to remember many things that might take him back to the *naked childhood*.

Other than that, Zefzaf's metaphorical language seems to be affected by the western idiom. No more is this point well illustrated than in the following italicized simile from the ending of the story:

In a moment, he fell off his chair near the window bumping his head against the wall. The sky remained bright while he was grunting *like a hog in a sty*.

Such transparent similes pose no problems in understanding to the western reader.

2.2 Allusions

The occurrence of allusions, however, is more challenging. Not only does the translator of Zefzaf have to cope with the usual linguistic difficulties, but he also has to handle different references and allusions. In some of its parts, the text of this story is interspersed with diverse references: Quranic, historical and cultural. The following excerpts illustrate this point:

How many strange things the human body carries without our being aware of them! There are two angels for example, one on the right shoulder recording the good deeds and the other on the left recording the bad deeds. The human body may also be inhabited by devils, and in this body there is also a spirit whose essence we cannot know since it is from a command of the Lord.

In this excerpt, there is more than one allusion. The reference to demons possessing human bodies is almost a universal superstitious belief shared in many cultures and is in no need of explanation. The other two references to the angels and the spirit, however, are more Islamic in their nature¹ and the English reader needs to be made aware of their scriptural origins.² These references, and other similar in nature, are part of the prior cultural knowledge taken

for granted by the author writing for a predominantly Muslim Arab audience. To give the closest approximation of the source language, therefore, it was necessary to opt for “glossing” or using explanatory footnotes. Here is another example with an historical reference that also requires the use of a footnote:

When they divorced, he didn't think she would do that, but he soon knew that a woman is capable of doing anything. Didn't she cause Adam to be dismissed from Eden and waged a war against Ali (May God be pleased with him)?

The first reference to Adam and Eve in Eden is a biblical one and needs no commentary to the western reader. The second allusion, however, derived from Islamic history, might be a vague one to the western reader. It refers to A'ishah, one of Prophet Muhammad's wives and daughter of his first Caliph.³

These cultural and historical allusions give a certain density to the language and need to be explicated in the translation to bring forth the richness of the text for the new readers. Excessive dependence on footnotes, however, can be rather intrusive, and, therefore, their uses were minimized as much as possible. Sometimes, explanatory notes were either deemed unnecessary or integrated into the body of the text instead of footnotes. The following excerpt from the translated short story is a case in point:

His wife was pretty, and he used to buy her glasses, pottery, sweets and rabbits slaughtered and live. And sometimes he even preferred her to his two young children. But she used to hit him or beat her cheeks and thighs [as some women do when they mourn their dead].

The cultural reference to a husband buying pottery and rabbits slaughtered and live as gifts to his wife are indicators of the local culture. Keeping this reference adds a foreignizing fidelity and gives the original flavor of a different culture. For this reason, the reference does not need a footnote since it is clear from the contextual surroundings. The second reference is to the custom of some women in the Middle East who beat their cheeks and thighs as an ultimate sign of sadness when they are mourning their dead. The bracketed note was inserted in the text to ensure that the significance of this lamenting act on the part of the wife is not lost to the western reader.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my gratitude to Peter Owens for his advice and editorial help in translating this short story, Gabe Boker for his helpful comments, and Muhammad Eissa for introducing me to the literary world of Zefzaf.

References

- Baker, Mona.** (2000). 'Linguistic perspectives on translation'. In Peter France (ed.), *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, 20-25. London and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brinton, Laurel.** (1995). 'Non-anaphoric reflexives in free indirect style: expressing the subjectivity of the non-speaker'. In Dieter Stein & Susan Wright (eds.), *Subjectivity and Subjectivisation: Linguistic Perspectives*, 137-194. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Herzfeld, Michael.** (2003). 'The unspeakable in pursuit of the ineffable: representations of untranslatability in ethnographic discourse'. In Paula G. Rubel & Abraham Rosman (eds.), *Translating Culture: Perspectives on Translation and Anthropology*, 109-134. Oxford and New York: Berg Press.
- Said, Edward.** (2002). 'Impossible Histories: Why the many Islams cannot be simplified'. *Harper's Magazine*, v. 305, July issue: 69-74.
- Stubbs, Michael.** (2001). *Words and Phrases: Corpus Studies of Lexical Semantics*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.
- The Koran.** (trans.) (1956, 2000). N. J. Dawood. London: Penguin.
- Wright, Susan.** (1995). 'Subjectivity and experiential syntax'. In Dieter Stein & Susan Wright (eds.), *Subjectivity and Subjectivisation: Linguistic Perspectives*, 151-172. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zefzaf, Muhammad.** (1999). *Al'amaal Al'kamela*. Morocco: Manshurat Wizarat Alsh'un Althakafi'ia.

Appendix I: The Nests (translated from Arabic by the author)

Lonely he sits at the window looking at the bright blue sky. The sky might not be clear later when clouds or flocks of black birds pass by, but he got used to all that. He doesn't change the position of his chair or move the small table on his right. Always he sits there in the same place smoking, drinking, and trying to remember many things that might take him back to the naked childhood. He would often hear his two children's words.

--Daddy, when I grow up, I'll marry and buy a big villa and you will live with my husband and me and I'll have many children.

His little girl would go to clean the feather duster and come back again saying:

--You smoke a lot daddy. The teacher tells us that smoking is bad.

He remembers the child's words, lights a cigarette, smokes it and looks at the sky from behind the window. Then he picks up some radish roots, which he likes very much, even though they also cause him some gas problems like belching and farting. Many were the things his daughter used to say, but her younger brother had a different way of thinking:

--Daddy when I grow up, I will be a doctor, and I will marry you to another woman because Mama beats me a lot and throws plates on you, and spits on you. Daddy I'll marry you a woman who doesn't spit on you or beat her cheeks.

The sky might be clear sometimes behind the window, and sometimes it becomes overcast with clouds and immigrant black birds. Everything changes behind the window except for the existence of two doves on a building's roof across the street. They might be a male and a female. Sure, it wouldn't be otherwise.

He picks up radish roots, takes a drink and looks from behind the window at the vases of flowers and the couple of doves flying together in return to their place over the roof. Maybe they have a nest there. Every couple above or under the earth builds some kind of nest for themselves, but it might get destroyed before they leave each other or after their deaths. Every nest is destined to be destroyed and people fight with all possible means to destroy their nests. But he is not positive what the two doves have on the roof, a nest, a hen, a cock or nothing. Whatever is hidden, no one else can know when it is hidden behind walls or barriers.

He smoked his cigarette quietly and looked at the two doves hovering nearby ready to return to their place. It seemed to him as if they were arguing and bickering as men and women do when angry with each other, and all the words of love and hypocrisy binding them together are forgotten. When each one of them finds out that love made between two in bed is in fact making love among four: a man and another woman and a woman and another man. Yet, the nest must be kept even when four live in it.

That's what he tried to do, keeping his nest so people could say he has a happy nest. He always hears about this proverbial happy nest and reads about it in books and magazines. People in the streets talk a lot about it too, but nobody really knows about what happens in these people's nests. They hide behind their clothes and cars as well as many other things and try to give the impression that they live in happiness. They lie to themselves until the time people say God bless his or her soul. If they were well off, they would have a small obituary on a newspaper page written by a poor journalist reading: "The deceased (May he or she rest in peace) departed this world to be with God." But who gave them rest or peace? Only the One who can give rest and peace and grant protection to the human soul knows why the lie of grieving the dead is over few days after their death, just as the lie of conjugal happiness is revealed in time.

He was glued to his chair thinking of the beautiful words his wife used to lavish on him and he thought that he endured a lot and understood a little. His daughter playing with her rope once said:

--When I grow up Daddy, you would live with me and I'd buy you a car and new things.

The son said:

--You went many times to Spain, Daddy. Now, you no longer travel much. When I grow up and become rich, I'd buy you travel tickets every year. You love Spain in summer and we'd go together.

He remembered only the title of a play by Samuel Beckett, a play he read in his youth and no longer understood, and said to himself:

--"The good old days!" then added "in Spain".

He wondered how young kids remember everything, but when they grow up, they hide everything and do everything in secret. And every one of them believes that no body knows what they hide. He poured himself another glass of wine and stared at the newspaper in his lap, but he could no longer concentrate on reading and could think only of his children whom his wife took with her to someplace in Switzerland. When they divorced, he didn't think she would do that, but he soon knew that a woman is capable of doing anything. Didn't she cause Adam to be dismissed from Eden and waged a war against Ali (May God be pleased with him)? ⁽¹⁾

His wife was pretty, and he used to buy her glasses, pottery, sweets and rabbits slaughtered and live. And sometimes he even preferred her to his two young children. But she used to hit him, beat her cheeks and thighs [as some women do when they mourn their dead]. She would spit on him and shout that he is not a man. And he would endure it all. The voice of the young boy comes back crying:

--Please Mama, don't do that.

The girl often would press her face against her pillow and cry loudly with a sob. When his wife would end her nasty words, which once used to be nice and sweet like a poem, he would leave home to the nearest pub and listen to the drunken men talking about their nests, their housewives who prepare them meals any time they come home, and the children who always get A's at their schoolwork. But he often saw women dragging half a dozen of crying children before the pub's door:

"You are here drinking and leaving us without food! You son of a... "

And quite often he wondered how could these children who don't have anything to eat get A's in their schoolwork? It's interesting that man lies to himself before lying to others, and it's interesting, too, for men to dream of happy nests as he himself did for years. His dream, however, went away once he woke up to reality. He couldn't talk at the café about what happened at home. Why then? All of them were happy and he didn't want to be the exception. If all their women proffered them children who get A's at school, to whom would he say that his wife spit on him? If he said that, they too would spit on him and continue drinking.

The men claim that their wives washed their feet with hot water or took the children to their aunts to spend the vacation there and leave the men feel like bachelors again. The women go to visit their aunts or grandmothers, but that's not important. The men come here and their wives go there, and the lying continues. Life is a big lie anyway. In any case, his wife went to spend her

annual vacation in Switzerland as the other women went to other places. What matters is that the nest is believed to be happy. Cheers to all, all is well!

When he raised his head, he saw one of the doves flying and soaring out in the sky on the way back to her place and he said to himself: Luckily Switzerland is far away, otherwise, this she-dove would have left her nest and flown to Bern leaving her poor male companion on the roof slowly committing suicide, hitting the wall with his beak until he dies.

--You are really selfish and think of no one but yourself.

--We decided from the beginning to build our nest. I never lied to you.

--All men say the same thing. You are all liars.

--And you know all men?

--Knowing one is enough.

--You changed a lot since we met.

--It is you who changed me, or you who changed. That's all.

He lit another cigarette and took a sip from his glass and kept thinking about what the she-dove might say to her male, but they flew together in the wide space and soon disappeared. As to when they would be back to their place, he was not sure. His ears picked up a piece of news transmitted by the radio close to him. The announcer said that an earthquake struck a place in the world and talked about a number of casualties, and he said to himself: "Oh my God! Even nature contributes to destroying and dispersing nests. Maybe these families had been happy in their nests, but nature kills and wounds whom she pleases as she perhaps buries cats, rats, dogs, and fish cooked or alive in aquariums. Nature so wills. How strange this universe is! If you don't do it yourself, somebody else will do it on behalf of you. And it doesn't matter whether you take precautions".

What if he lost his wife and children in an earthquake, what would he do? Would he still look at the two doves in his spare time while smoking and drinking and lifting his head from the newspaper every now and then? When somebody dies here, another is born there. He could marry again a new woman who might die before him or outlive him. A good idea indeed so long as we are destined to lose our nests at any moment. We also lose our lives without our choice, as we are born without our choice. Sometimes we even get married without our choice. Who knows? It might be Eros's will alone. ⁽²⁾ He read about Eros but he doesn't know him. Maybe he exists inside the human body. How many strange things the human body carries without our being aware of them! There are two angels ⁽³⁾, for example, one on the right shoulder recording the good deeds and the other on the left recording the bad deeds. The human body may also be inhabited by devils, and in this body there is also a spirit whose essence we cannot know since it is from a command of the Lord. ⁽⁴⁾ Many are the things that live inside the human body, things unknown to man who only knows something called pain and tries to escape it and protect himself from it by hiding inside a nest. Even one made of straw until a strong wind or a storm comes along and blows it away. Nevertheless, it is possible to try and rebuild the nest.

That's what he, in his isolation, had been thinking about lately after his wife shamelessly left him to Switzerland taking the two kids with her.

Rebuilding the nest? He laughed hysterically, then suddenly stopped and looked around him suspiciously as if somebody were present with him. Maybe there was somebody present but he could not see them like those who inhibit the human body for example.

There was a woman working in one of the banks who would come from time to time to drink with him and clean the house, but she has nothing new to say except:

--A man should not trust a woman. They are all the same: when a woman feels that a man loves her, she does what she wants. You experienced that yourself, and you don't deserve all that torture. It doesn't matter that she went to Switzerland. When the children grow up, they will remember their father, and they will fulfill all his wishes. Consider me their mother. They are smart, aren't they? It's true that I didn't get married, but men never understood me. Can I drink another glass? Also if people want to build their nests, they have to be careful about choosing the right partner to live with. You shouldn't be sad. Look at this tree behind the window, look at these birds flying in the sky and landing on the tree. Well, no, I don't know why you often look at the flying birds and the dove couple and not listen to what I say. All right, I'll cook you something to eat. You don't eat well now, but when we live under the same roof, you'd see my love.

The woman would come later on to repeat the same litany and he would wish she would say something else or ask him questions, but she, too, is seeking to build a nest and it seems that her way of trying to build it for the last thirty-seven years didn't work out. It also seems that she used to say the same words to the men she met before.

For years he looked at the sky, cloudy or bright. This woman left as other women did, and maybe she built herself a nest somewhere else, and maybe it was destroyed as well. He went to the kitchen and started to contemplate the empty wine bottles, then went back to sit on the chair close to the window and some memories came back to him: "Daddy when I grow up, I will..." and "Daddy, I'll buy you..."

"I'm about to go crazy", he said to himself while holding his daughter's letter.

(Dear Daddy: I've become a woman. You are my father in spite of everything, and I ask your permission before I marry a young man from Guatemala. I want to build a happy nest. Come to visit whenever you want so that I can introduce you to my future husband).

He threw the letter under his feet and started to cry. How many nests were built and destroyed. My God! What can a man do with himself? He wondered and gulped down his glass of wine all at once. In a moment, he fell off his chair near the window and bumped his head against the wall. The sky remained bright while he was grunting like a hog in a sty.

Notes

¹ Quranic references here are based on “*The Koran*” translated by N. J. Dawood (1956, 2000).

² “When the twin keepers [angels] receive him, the one seated on his right, the one on his left, each word he utters shall be noted down by a vigilant guardian” (The Koran: Surah 50, verse 17); and “They ask you about the spirit, say: “The spirit is from a command of my Lord and I have only given you [people] a small amount of the knowledge” (The Koran: Surah 17, verse 85).

³ The reference is to A'ishah, one of Prophet Muhammad's wives and daughter of his first caliph (successor). She supported those who were fighting against the fourth caliph Ali in the Battle of the Camel 656 AD.