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Challenges of Literary Translation from Persian into English: An Analysis of Francis Gladwin's Translation of *Gulistan*

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Abstract:

Translating literary texts has always been regarded as one of the most challenging tasks in the history of translation. However, it becomes a more complex task when we translate Persian-Tajik classical literary texts into English. Saadi Shirazi's *Gulistan*, a world literary masterpiece, has a unique style, distinguished features, and characteristics that pose particular problems and challenges to translators. The present paper proposes to analyze how linguistic and stylistic issues, culture-religious bound terms, and artistic devices have been dealt with within the English translation of *Gulistan*. The researcher will take Francis Gladwin's translation as an example for discussion.

Keywords: *Gulistan*, English, translation, Gladwin, culture, language, artistic devices.

A process through which a message is transformed from one language into another is usually called translation. According to Foster, translation is an act of transferring through which the content of a text is transferred from the source language into the target language (1). Catford argues that translation is a replacement of the text, not its transference. He states: "In translation, there is a substitution of TL meanings for SL meanings: not transference of TL meanings into the SL. In transference there is an implantation of SL meanings into the TL text. These two processes must be clearly differentiated in any theory of translation" (quoted by Bassnett 16).

Culture-oriented approaches view translation as a process that involves extra-linguistic aspects of the text as well. They emphasize the significant roles context, culture, economy, ideologies, politics, and other factors play in translation activity. Bassnett and Lefevere, the first proponents of the cultural turn in translation studies, assure: "There 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" (11). The author of *Contexts in Translation* claims that failure to consider the contexts of a text is mainly responsible for the most serious mistakes in comprehending and reproducing the meaning of a discourse (Nida 9). Many translation theorists also maintain that translation is a process of intercultural exchanges and that culture plays a considerable role in translating a particular text (Newmark; Venuti; Hermans; Sherry Simon; Harish Trivedi).

Literary translation is one of the most demanding and complex tasks. In Herman's view, literary translation represents a distinctive kind of translating because it is concerned with a distinctive kind of text (77). "Literary translation", according to Newmark, "is the most testing type of translation" (*Approaches* 162). Literary works have their distinguished features. Literary translation of literary texts is more challenging. The language of literature is different from ordinary language. In the literary text, stylistic and formal features, tropes, and figures of speech are significant. Particular difficulties arise because of cultural differences. Literary texts often use culture-bound expressions, humour, maxims, proverbs, idioms, and puns, and therefore cannot be rendered quickly into the target language.

Gulistan is a masterpiece of Persian-Tajik classical literature written by Saadi Shirazi in 1258. It is a collection of poems and stories in *Sajj* (rhythmical prose). The book has distinguished features, characteristics, and complexities that pose particular problems and challenges to translators. Saadi's style of writing and word choice are unique, *Gulistan* is thematically rich and replete with metaphors, idiomatic expressions, puns, allusions, and historical-culture references. Saadi often enhances his words with quotes borrowed from the Quran, hadiths, and religious teachings. Arshadul Quadri states that rendering the *Gulistan* of Saadi into any language and matching Saadi's inimitable style remains a tough task for his translators (1). In this regard, to shed some light on the problems and challenges that might come with rendering *Gulistan* into English, some passages from the translation of Francis Gladwin will be analyzed.

Gladwin's complete translation *The Gulistan of Sady* was published in 1806 in Calcutta. It includes the preface and eight chapters of *Gulistan*. He translated it directly

from Persian into English. Compared to other English translations of *Gulistan*, a distinguished feature of Gladwin's is that it makes no difference between the poetry and prose passages of the original. He translates all the poetry pieces of *Gulistan* in the form of prose. The translator of *Gulistan* faces various challenges concerning culture, semantics, syntax, vocabulary, grammar, style, and aesthetics. One major issue the translator encounters is the translation of proper names and religious concepts found in *Gulistan*. For instance, in the fourth tale of the first chapter, Saadi writes:

*Bo badon yor gasht hamsari Lut,
Khonadoni nubuwwatash gum shud.
Sagi ashobi Kahf ruze chand,
Payi nekon giriftu Odam shud.*

These stanzas in the target language sound:

Lot's wife associated with the wicked, and his posterity forfeited the gift of prophecy, but the dog of the companions of the cave, by long converse with the virtuous, became a rational creature. (Gladwin 33)

Translation is the process of transferring a message from the source text to the target text. The message is embedded in the source culture. Eugene Nida, while defining translation and the role of the translator, states: "The role of a translator is to facilitate the transfer of the message, meaning, and cultural elements from one language into another and create an equivalent response to the receivers" (*Toward* 163). In this case, Gladwin's translation fails to communicate Saadi's message to the target readers and to create a similar response. The terms "*Lut*", "*ashobi Kahf*" (companions of the cave), and "*nubuwwat*" (prophecy) in the source language are not ordinary expressions. They carry the burden of cultural-historical and religious meanings. Therefore, in dealing with these words, the translator faces challenges.

The proper name "*Lut*" refers to the prophet Lot. "*Ashobi Kahf*" is a legend in Islamic and Christian traditions. This story is also known as "The Seven Sleepers of the Ephesus" and "The People of the Cave". *Ashobi Kahf* hid inside a cave and went to sleep there for several hundred years to escape persecution for their faith in the Roman Empire around 250 CE. A dog accompanied these young men in the cave. When they eventually awoke, they found that the world had changed, and their religious belief no longer put them in danger.

To successfully transfer the message and meaning of the author, the translator should consider these cultural implications. The transliteration of the proper name “*Lut*” (Lot), and the informational equivalent of “*ashobi Kahf*” (companions of the cave) are not self-sufficient. Since these expressions may not be easily understood by the target text readers, it is appropriate to provide explanatory information in footnotes or parentheses. It would help English-speaking readers who may not be familiar with the allusive references of these names to understand the message better.

Translating figures of speech, particularly metaphors, is one of the most challenging tasks for translators, as noted by Newmark. He points out: “Whilst the central problem of translation is the overall choice of a translation method for a text, the most important particular problem is the translation of metaphor” (*A Textbook* 106). In the source text, the term “*badon*” (the wicked) is a metaphor for the people of prophet Lot, who were immoral and sinful, whereas “*nekon*” (righteous people) refers to the companions of the cave. In this poem, Saadi makes references and expects that the reader is familiar with them. However, it can not be assumed that English readers too can identify these intertextual references and recognize the underlying meanings of Saadi's words. Gladwin's rendition of this poem is a faithful equivalent in form. However, it is literal and does not offer a context for the original text.

Moreover, “*Odam*” (rational creature) - the equivalent opted for by the translator does not fully convey the originally intended meaning. There is a saying, which goes as follows: “Every word of Saadi has seventy-two meanings.” The meaning of Saadi's words should not be understood only on a surface level; rather, it needs to be contemplated on many layers. By using the word “*Odam*”, Saadi emphasizes the central idea of the poem: the benefit of surrounding oneself with virtuous people. It says that the dog earned a high status and dignity as a man because it had been in the company of good people. The second stanza refers to the fact that the dog was included in an integral part of the story mentioned in the Quran (Surah 18, verses 9–26). The legend “The people of the cave and the dog” has usually been referred to in a combination, as “*ashobi Kahf*” (the companions of the cave) or “the people of the cave”, not as “the people of the cave and the dog”. In this context, the term “*Odam*” (man) is used metaphorically for ‘dog’. Overall, the translation method for the text and its culture-religious expressions was not the best option to facilitate the transference of Saadi's message to the English receiver.

Some words are specific to a particular culture and have no exact or near synonymy in the target culture, therefore, creating a potential challenge for translators. Consider the following sentences extracted from the twentieth story of chapter seven:

Yake dar surati darveshon, na dar sirati eshon, dar mahfile didam nishasta. Darveshonro dasti qudrat bastaast va tavongaronro poyi irodat shikasta.

The translation of the sentences in English:

I saw, sitting in a company, a certain person who wore the habit of a Durwaishes, but without possessing the disposition of one; Durwaishes have not the means and the rich not the inclination to be charitable. (Gladwin 317)

The word “*durwaish*” has been translated through a transference method (Newmark’s classification) in both sentences. In the Tajik language, the meaning of “*Durwaish*” (*darvesh, derwish, darvish*) varies depending on the context, such as ‘poor’, ‘beggar’, and ‘pious man’. However, the English text does not differentiate between the various meanings of this word.

Furthermore, the translator has not provided an English version or a footnote description for “*durwaish*”. There are many such ambiguous words or puns in *Gulistan*. They can be confusing not only for translators but can go on to mislead their readers as well. The Tajik readers can resolve the meanings of these words through linguistic and contextual clues, or by consulting with commentaries and explanatory books of *Gulistan*. In the translation, the word “*durwaish*” is left undefined, limiting the text to only one of its many potential interpretations. Since this term was significant in the source text, the translator needed to explain it to Western readers and clarify the writer’s intended meaning. Gladwin could achieve it by adding a footnote explaining to whom the word “*durwaish*” stands in the context of the story as a whole.

Translation inevitably involves transformations due to varying grammatical structures, lexicons, and descriptive means among languages. A case of lexical transformation can be seen in the example of the translation of “*dasti qudrat doshtan*” and “*poyi irodat shikastan*”.

The metaphorical phrase “*dasti qudrat doshtan*” stands for ‘being rich, to have property’; “*poyi irodat shikastan*” can be used for having no interest in doing something. Since the meanings of phraseological units and idioms can not be produced literally, they can not be translated literally. So, it is necessary for their underlying meanings first to be

recognized and then translated. These phrases have literal meanings in the source text, but in the target text, they have acquired basic meanings. In this case, the translation succeeded in communicating the meaning of the source language however, at the cost of the distortion of aesthetic and stylistic features of the original. The significance of the choices that Saadi made in *Gulistan* is lost in the target text. For example, the following sentences in the source text are in Sajj:

*Yake dar surati darveshon, na dar sirati eshon, dar mahfile didam nishasta.
Darveshonro dasti qudrat bastaast va tavongaronro poyi irodat shikasta.*

'Surat' and 'sirat', 'darveshon' and 'eshon', 'qudrat' and 'irodat', 'basta' and 'shikasta' are rhyming words. Sajj is one of the main stylistic features of *Gulistan*. By rhyming words, Saadi formed sentences that were melodic and rhetorical. However, the translation misses these aesthetic features.

The figurative language creates potential challenges for translators. The following piece of poetry in the tale 20th of the chapter of *Gulistan* contains several figures of speech, such as personification, metaphor, imagery, alliteration, assonance, and repetition:

*Dar chashmi man omad on sihisarvi baland,
Birbud dilam zi dastu dar poy fikand.
In didai shukh mekashad dil ba kamand,
Khohi, ki ba kas dil nadihi, dida buband.*

In Francis Gladwin's rendition it goes as follows:

That stately cypress coming into my sight, has captivated my heart and deprived me of my strength, so that I lie prostrate at her feet. Those mischievous eyes drew my heart into the snare. If you wish to preserve your heart, shut your eyes. (271)

In this poem, Saadi effectively employs alliteration - d, k; assonance - a, i; repetition - dil, dida. Francis Gladwin has attempted to approximate the rhythm and meter and create the sound effect of the original by using words that end with the sound 't'.

In the first line, the term "sihisarvi", which refers to a straight cypress tree, represents a lover. The terms "sihi" (straight), and "baland" (tall) are the adjectives for the addressee. The second description, 'tall' has been omitted from the translation. The phrase "sihisarvi baland" refers to the graceful tall figure of the beloved. In Persian literary tradition, it is pretty common to refer to a person as a tall cypress tree walking ("sarvi

ravon”). However, for English-speaking culture, comparing a beautiful woman with a cypress tree seems ridiculous.

In the second line, “*dil az dast rabudan*” metaphorically means ‘to make someone fall in love’, whereas “*dar poy afkandan*” implies ‘to trample’. The translator has attempted to intimate Saadi’s beautiful wording and rhetorically render these phrases. Rather than using the phrase ‘to make me fall in love’, he says: ‘She has captivated my heart’. The expression “*dar poy afkandan*” (to trample) was translated as ‘deprived me of my strength, so that I lie prostrate at her feet’. The translated sentence is longer than the original because the translator has added the words ‘strength’, ‘deprive’, ‘prostate’, ‘so’, and ‘her’, which are absent in the source text. This method of adding and clarifying the meaning of the original sentence caused the translation to be elongated.

The second stanza in this poem is also from the speaker’s point of view. He speaks about his lousy condition with regret and uses the word ‘mischievous’ as a sign of contempt for the eyes (Abdulmannon 25). There is a saying which goes as follows: it is the eye that first sees and then the heart that falls in love. Therefore, it is a mistake to consider it an attribution of the beloved. It would be more accurate if the translator used the correct determiner, ‘these’, and provided the necessary information. The last line of the poem ‘If you wish to preserve your heart, shut your eyes’ was translated verbatim. It resulted in a change of mood and tone from the original.

Tajik grammar, unlike English, lacks gender-specific pronouns. The Tajik language uses the pronoun “on” or “u” for all the pronouns “he”, “she”, or “it”. In this poem, the gender of the addressee (beloved) is not explicitly apparent. However, the story’s beginning indicates that it is on homoerotic topic. Francis Gladwin overlooks the context and translates using feminine pronouns in English. While he accurately reproduced the homoerotic aesthetics of some other tales of *Gulistan*, he neglected them in this example.

It is noteworthy that the study of the aspects, such as the translator’s subjectivity, purpose, and intervention, needs careful and detailed analysis, which exceeds the scope and space of the current research paper.

Translating *Gulistan* presents significant challenges, often resulting in some loss of meaning. To effectively convey Saadi’s intended message in the English lingua-cultural context, the translator must consider various factors, including socio-cultural background, religious elements, historical context, and the literary traditions of both the source (Persian) and target (English) languages. The abundance of ambiguous words and culturally and religiously specific expressions in *Gulistan* can pose considerable difficulties for the

translator. Therefore, creativity and various translation strategies are essential in addressing these challenges.

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