

Language, Culture, and Translation: Theoretical Assumptions of Nicholson in Translating Kashf Al-Mahjub

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Abstract *This paper reviews the English translation by Nicholson of a Persian Sufi text Kashf Al-Mahjub by Hujveri, to explore the possibilities of translation from one culture to another culture and the strategies of translating specific terminology of Sufi text for Anglophone audience. The paper explains the ways adopted by translators to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap. The techniques and strategies adopted by the translator reflect the theoretical assumptions of the translator regarding the nature, process and purpose of the translation.*

Key Words:

Autonomy,
Equivalence,
Function,
Translatability,
Cultural Gap,
Orientalist
Translation

Introduction

Translating a text into another language is as old a practice as the history of civilization itself. Usually, this activity has been purposeful and it has served some political, social, economic, religious, literary, or intellectual purposes. Apparently, it seems to be a very simple act of conveying the message of a text in one language into another language. However, the development of translation studies as a discipline has given rise to various debates which amount to the development of translation theories and translation paradigms (Pym: 2010). These paradigms and theories are applied now a day to explore the various factors involved in the act of translating. The theories have gradually emerged and got explored in the recent few decades. In spite of this fact, the act of translating has been in vogue for centuries before the birth of translation theories and paradigms.

Pym (2010) is of the view that every translator who did translation in any period of history was supposed to have certain assumptions which might have been theoretical and paradigmatic in nature. Keeping this in view, this paper explores

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the theoretical assumptions of the famous orientalist translator R.A. Nicholson in the translation of a Persian Sufi text, *The Kashf Al-Mahjub* into English.

Theoretical Perspective of Translation Studies

The act of translating involves an original text produced by a writer in a particular language and for a particular audience, and a translator translates the same text in another language for another audience. This means that translating involves an author and a translator, an original text and a translated text, the language of the original text and the language of the translated version. Moreover, the target audience of the original text and that of the translation is not the same. It is obvious that the act of translating involves theoretical assumptions about the relation between author and translator, the original text and its translation, the two languages involved in it, and the purpose of the original writer and the translator. Venuti (2000) opines that, keeping this in view, all translation theories fall into three broader paradigms which he terms as autonomy, equivalence and function. The question of autonomy deals with the role of author and translator in the act translation. In this regard, the debate revolves around the role of translator, his/her visibility and invisibility, and the poststructuralist question of authorship and the creativity of the translator. As the translation is a process which involves decision-making in various contexts, the role of the translator becomes significant. Hermens (2009) has talked about the 'inbetweenness' of the translator. When the focus is on the comparison between the original text and the target text, the theoretical debate deals with the question of 'equivalence'. The theoretical discussions have differentiated between the formal and dynamic equivalence (Fawcett: 2014). Pym (2010) has introduced the terminology of natural and directional equivalence. At this level, the comparison involves linguistic issues of semantics and pragmatics, sociolinguistics and stylistics. At this level of theoretical debate, the question of translatability and untranslatability also arises. The translation strategies used to create translated texts reflect the assumptions of the translator in this regard. The third category of debate in translation theory involves the function of translation and the target audience for which the translation is created. In this regard, the agency of the translation also becomes significant. This is the point where the postcolonial, feminist, and orientalist perspectives become significant for translation theories.

Translation Studies is an interdisciplinary field of knowledge. Its theoretical standpoint involves theories about language and theories about culture. Translating from one language into another language involves the comparison of the two languages at the linguistic level such as semantics, syntax and morphology and stylistics. Moreover, the relationship between the culture and the language also comes to the fore. All languages have their respective culture specific contexts. Therefore, translating from one language into another language becomes not only

a linguistic comparison but also a cultural comparison. Therefore, evaluating a translation involves the theories about language, culture and the translation process.

In the backdrop of the aforementioned theoretical perspectives of translation studies, this research paper evaluates the translation of a Persian Sufi text *The Kashf Al-Mahjub*, and its English translation for Anglophone audience by R.A. Nicholson who is a reputed Orientalist scholar. The purpose of the analysis is to foreground the theoretical assumptions of the translator, which are reflected through the strategies adopted by the translator. The primary objective of the paper is to highlight the theoretical assumptions of Nicholson through the strategies used by him in translating the Sufi text. In this regard, the data has been the translation of the introduction of the book and the various relevant items regarding the Sufi terminology in chapter xxiv of the book. The data discussion highlights Nicholson's strategies of translating these items.

The process of translation involves various translation strategies which are rooted in multiple theoretical perspectives and their use indicates the theoretical assumptions of the translator. Nicholson has used various strategies in his translation, and the use of these strategies foregrounds his purpose of the translation. Newmark (1988) has pointed out a number of procedures which a translator may use. These include transference/transliteration, naturalization, cultural equivalent, functional equivalent, descriptive equivalent, synonym, compensation and paraphrase. These techniques and procedures produce various types of translation which include word for word translation, literal translation, faithful translation, semantic translation, adaptation, free translation, idiomatic translation and communicative translation (Newmark:1988). Venuti (2001) proposes two broader categories of translation strategies: domestication and foreignization. These strategies propose that languages and cultures are not similar and translating from one language and culture into another language and culture involves the strategies that would tackle the linguistic difference and bridge the cultural gap. The analysis of Nicholson's translation of *Kashf Al-Mahjoob* reflects many strategies used by the translator at various places.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Kashf Al-Mahjoob is a Sufi text in Persian language written in the 11th Century by a Muslim Sufi. It is one of the earliest Sufi texts and explains Sufi doctrines to Muslim audience. The translation of *Kashf Al-Mahjoob* by Nicholson was done in 1911. It was printed by Leyden: E.J. Brill, Imprimerie Orientale. It was printed as volume XVII of E.J.W.Gibb Memorial Series during the British Imperialism in India. Nicholson translated the Lahore edition. The audience of this text is the British Orientalists who were interested in the religious, literary, and other texts

produced in the British colony before the colonization. The historical gap between the writing of original text and the translation is almost of nine centuries.

As the source text is written in religious and Sufi perspective, it is replete with culture bound items and particular Sufi vocabulary. Nicholson's handling of the text is very interesting. In this paper, the translation of the introductory pages before the first chapter is analyzed. Moreover, the translation of the chapter on the Sufi terminology (Chapter XXIV) is also reviewed. The introductory chapter of the source text opens with a traditional Arabic reiteration.

The book opens with the Arabic text "Bismillahir Rahman NirRahim". Nicholson translates it as "IN THE Name OF GOD, THE MERCIFUL, THE COMPASSIONATE.". This is the literal translation in which all the words are translated by giving their near equivalence in English. The syntactic order of the source text is also retained. The next Arabic expression is "Rabbi YassirwaTammin". This expression literally means a prayer for ease and successful completion. Nicholson translates it as "O Lord, bestow on us mercy from Thyself and provide for us a right course of action. This translation is explanatory in nature and the translator has an equivalent expression leaving behind the syntactic structure of the source text. The next part is traditional Arabic Khutba (Ceremonial opening of a text).

In translating this Arabic piece, Nicholson has used archaic expressions and he has provided near equivalence to convey the sense of the text. It is almost a word for word translation. He translates the word 'awlya' as 'Saints' and 'asfia' as 'intimate. In the translation of this passage, it is obvious that Nicholson is interested in keeping it literal and ceremonial so that the traditional structure of a typical Persian text may be understood. In the next passage, there are examples of the variation of techniques, the expression, 'istikhara' is translated as 'God's blessing' which is word for word translation, but it does not convey the ritual sense of praying to God for guidance and blessing. Nicholson focuses on the dynamic equivalence only. In this very passage, two words 'istianat' and 'tawfiq' are used and the paragraph ends with an Arabic expression 'waBillah al-awn wa al-tawfiq'. 'Istianat' means help and 'al-awn' also means help. In the phrase 'istianatkhawhumwataufiq' Nicholson translates the sentence as 'now I pray God to aid and prosper me in its completion'. This is a literal translation though the structure of the sentence is a bit different from the source text. The word 'istianat' is translated word for word whereas 'tawfiq' is translated as a sense for sense. In the translation of Arabic expression 'waBillah al-awn wa al-tawfiq', Nicholson once again opts for dynamic equivalence. He translates it as 'it is God that gives success'. It is important to note that two words 'awn' and 'tawfiq' are not translated separately but a single expression 'success' is used for them. It means that Nicholson does not stick to one expression in the translation and he keeps on changing the expressions to avoid the repetition and monotony. In a later section the source text writer gives a definition of the word 'tawfiq' in Arabic as 'Al-

tawfiqhuwa ‘i-qudrat ‘ala ‘l-taal ‘inda ‘l-isti’mal’ (p6). In this section, the translator not only translates but also transliterates the original term in parenthesis and uses this transliteration in the main text: ‘the expression tawfiq is void of meaning’. In translating the transliterated Arabic definition of ‘tawfiq’, translator makes an addition as he uses ‘increased strength’. No word in the Arabic text gives the meaning of increase, it is an addition by the translator to convey the sense of the statement that he has translated. The introduction of the book is subdivided into eight sections.

There are numerous terms in the introductory part which are transliterated and put in parenthesis or placed in the main text out of the parenthesis. The list of these terms is as under:

Table 1.

	ST	TT
1.	(istikharat)	Ask a blessing
2.	(thawab)	Recompense
3.	(muqarraban)	The favourites of God
4.	(kashf)	Unveiling
5.	(mukashafat)	Revelation
6.	(hijab-i-rayni)	“veil of covering”
7.	(hijab-i-ghayni)	“veil of clouding”
8.	(dhat)	Essence
9.	(sifat)	Attributes
10.	(rayni)	“coverings”
11.	Rayn	-
12.	Kate	(sealing)
13.	tab’	(imprinting)
14.	Watan	-
15.	Khatar	-
16.	(maqamat)	Stations
17.	(Friday)	Quietism
18.	‘ulama	-
19.	(kibrit-i-Ahmar)	Philosopher’s Stone
20.	Talitha	explained in foot notes
21.	Dawa al-misk	explained in footnotes
22.	(zadaqa)	disbelief in positive religion
23.	(tawhid)	Unification

The table shows the shifting of the techniques used by Nicholson. At time he translates the source text words and puts them in parenthesis to indicate the source text term in the text. At other times, he places the loan words in the main text and

puts their meaning in the parenthesis. In the case of a few loan terms he gives the explanation in the footnotes.

In the table above fifteen terms are translated in the target text and the translation of the original word is put in parenthesis. The four terms in the above table are used as loan terms and left untranslated because their meanings are given in translation earlier in the text. The variation of the techniques in the translation of specific Sufi text serves the purpose of foreignization and reader clearly understands that the text is translated. Moreover, through these techniques, the cultural gap is bridged and the message is conveyed to the target audience.

Most of these terms are literally translated, but in the case of a few terms, Nicholson has managed the cultural gap by sense for sense translation. The term six in the above table is translated as "wheel of covering". The word 'rayn' literally means 'rust'. To convey the sense intended by the author of the text Nicholson has used the term 'covering'. The two types of wheel mentioned in the source text by Hujveri differ in being permanent and temporary. Though the English word covering does not have the sense permanence, however, its occurrence in the context conveys the meaning successfully. In this way, Nicholson manages the translation of an untranslatable expression. Nicholson's translation of the introduction by the author sets a pattern of managing the culture bounded discipline specific terms throughout the book.

Nicholson's approach and his theoretical assumptions become more obvious in the translation of specific Sufi terms explained by the author in chapter XXIV of the source text.

In chapter XXIV, which is the second last chapter of *Kashf Al-Mahjub* the author explains specific terms of Sufism. In the introductory part, Hujvery explains the need and significance of explaining the terms by referring to the specific terms of seven disciplines which were popular among the intellectuals of Hujvery's time. Nicholson omits the translation of these terms as they do not add any knowledge to the Sufistic discipline. This omission is pragmatic and functional in nature as the audience of the text would be interested in knowing and understanding Sufism. Moreover, the translation of these terms which are not related to the main theme of the book would be a laborious exercise. Another reason of omission is that the seven disciplines of classical Muslim scholarship are alien to the Anglophone audience of Nicholson's time. Obviously, this omission is not because of the untranslatability of terms, it is rather the translator's pragmatic choice, and he has exercised the autonomy of translator. The chapter XXIV has ten headings which introduced a major set of Sufi terminology. In all these headings, the source text's discipline specific terms are transliterated. The terms occurred in the heading as loan words and even in the explanation of these terms the translated terms are retained and their equivalence are given in parenthesis. The following table lists these terms and their equivalents in the target text given in parenthesis.

Table 2.

S. No	ST	TT
1.	Hal, Waqt	(state, time)
2.	Maqam, Tamkin, Talwin	(station, untranslated)
3.	Muhadarat, Mukashafat	Untranslated
4.	Quad, Bast	(contraction, expansion)
5.	Uns, Hayat	(intimacy, awe)
6.	Qahr, Lutf	(violence, kindness)
7.	Navy, Ithbat	(negation, affirmation)
8.	Musamarat, Muhadathat	(nocturnal discourse, conversation)
9.	Ilm al-Yaqin, Ayn al-Yaqin, Haqq al-Yaqin	certain knowledge, certain sight, certain truth
10.	Ilm, Ma'rifat	(gnosis)
11.	Shari'at, Haqiqat	(law, truth)

The terms in the above table are not translated when they occur in the heading but in the paragraphs, they are translated, and their meanings are given in parenthesis. There are four terms in the table which are not translated at all and they are used as loan words in the translated text.

Apart from these terms, there are two lists of terms that are transliterated, and the translator has not given any equivalence of these terms in the text. These terms include: Haqeeqat, Khatarat, Watanat, Tams, Rams, 'Ala'iq, Wasa'it, Zawa'id, Fawa'id, Malja', Manja, Kulliyat, Lawa'ih, Lawami', Tawali', Tawariq, Lata'if. Sirr, Najwa, Isharat, Ima, Warid, Intibah, Istibah, Qarar, and Inzi'aj. These terms are specific to Sufi discourses and their word for word and sense for sense translation does not convey their terminological essence. Therefore, Nicholson chooses not to translate them and their transliteration is supposed to be sufficient. The sense of the term is explained by the source text author. Nicholson translates this explanation of the term by the author.

It is obvious from the previous discussion that the translator has used multiple strategies such as transliteration/ borrowing, literal translation, sense for sense translation, equivalence and omission. Nicholson is well aware of the linguistic and cultural gap that he faces during the translation. At times he exercises the autonomy of translator in the decision making process and he freely uses his understanding of the text and at times chooses the visibility of the translator by foreignization strategy and at time he makes himself invisible by domesticating the text. Moreover, Nicholson uses equivalence strategies with the assumption that text is partially translatable and the cultural and linguistic gap is to be tackled by the dynamic equivalence and literal translation. Nicholson is also well aware of the purpose and audience of the source text and his target audience in the translation.

Therefore, he makes necessary manipulations in the translations. His purpose is to create a target text which may convey the sense of the Sufi text to the Orientalist scholars who are interested in knowing the spiritual dimension of Muslim culture. The translation in this regard is a part of the Orientalist project of exploring and translating the eastern text for producing knowledge to exercise the power and control on the communities who belong to the source text culture.

Conclusion

Kashf Al-Mahjub by Hujvery is a culturally rich text in Persian language. It is a representative text of Muslim spirituality. Nicholson's translation is one of the earliest efforts to translate this text. The text is replete with culture-bound discipline-specific terms. Most of these terms do not have a suitable equivalence. Therefore, Nicholson uses a variety of techniques to bridge the cultural and linguistic gap. These strategies reflect the theoretical assumptions of Nicholson. He does not stick to any one theory. His techniques highlight the role of the translator in the decision making process. He also tries to manage dynamic equivalence between the two texts. Nicholson's assumption about the purpose of translation is that message of the text should be conveyed keeping in view the interest of the audience and necessary omissions should be made. Though, at the time of translation, translation theories had not emerged, but we may deduce many theoretical assumptions from this text. It may be concluded that translations before the birth of translation studies are site of theoretical assumptions and research in translation evaluation may benefit from it.

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