

## Shifting Meaning in Translations of John Donne's Poetry: A Comparative Study of Literary Translation in Arabic and English

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### ABSTRACT

*The study attempts to see how the meaning changes when John Donne's poetry is translated from English into Arabic, analyzing selective John Donne's poems and critical interpretation. The study examines the psychological, theological, and linguistic barriers that influence the metaphysical themes in Donne's work when presented in Arabic culture. In this research, the difficulties of literary translation are demonstrated, especially when we try to travel through different poetical conventions, religious concepts, and linguistic structures. The study hypothesizes that (1) Translating John Donne's metaphysical poetry from English into Arabic can lead to significant changes in religious and philosophical themes (2) Cultural differences between English and Arabic-speaking readers, particularly when it comes to religion, are problematic in translating such poems in Arabic (3) Venuti's translational model of domestication and foreignization can be adopted in translating John Donne's poems into Arabic. The current study presents a theoretical explanation of literary translation and meaning shifts. Then, some famous Donne's poems have been selected to be analyzed depending on specific criteria and a proposed rendering has been provided by the researchers. The study concludes that (1) Translating John Donne's metaphysical poetry from English into Arabic leads to significant changes in religious and philosophical themes (2) Cultural differences between English and Arabic-speaking readers, particularly when it comes to religion, are problematic and mean that the metaphysical significance of original poems must be altered by adaptations for local stylistic reasons (3) Venuti's translational model of domestication and foreignization is adopted in translating John Donne's poems into Arabic.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Shifting Meaning - Translation - John Donne's - Poetry- Arabic - English*

### 1. Introduction

The metaphysical poetry of John Donne is especially difficult to translate because it encompasses a complex intertwining of philosophical, theological, and other cultural factors, and these subtleties often have no direct Arabic equivalent. Problems arise for translators in finding Arabic translations for these profound Christian theological terms. This study will elucidate how these problems are handled not only by translators but also by intermediaries (referring to the metaphorical shift of meaning after translation), and what changes result in Donne's poetry being read within an Arabic cultural context. Al-Safi (2017) argues that 'the translation theory of modern times needs to be sensitive to the shifts of meaning that occur when you take what was written in one language and put it into another'.

John Donne was one of Britain's major metaphysical poets of the 17th century. It was Donne who wove together his usages to create an enigmatic stringlike structure where words intertwine rather than merely

hang off it. He employed it on subjects such as love and death, spirituality, and human destiny. At times he would weave Christian theology deeply into his work. Donne entwined his poetry together with subtle elegance. The poetry flowed freely in rhythms, not unlike blood surging through veins. This of course attracted and won for him generations of students and scholarship. Yet it also posed an impossible task for someone who wanted to read Donne and deliver the same pleasure that it does today in some other language. Nevertheless, these selfsame qualities to the translator present a mountain head high Tribute; and that is more so given the cultural and linguistic extremes involved, none are more extreme than those between English and Arabic.

Translating a poem is not a matter simply of transcribing text, but rather calls for interpretation and creativity. The translator must retrace not only the words, but also the cultural, emotional, and theological wheels that combine to move the poem along. This study aims to analyze the shifts in meaning and cultural changes that occur when English metaphysical poetry written by John Donne is translated into Arabic. In particular, it will investigate how differences in language, religion, and culture between the two areas affect the translation process and affect the reception of metaphysical ideas Donne.

### **Methodology**

In this study, a comprehensible theoretical explanation of certain concepts was provided. These concepts are difficulties in literary translation theory, the impact of cultural and religious factors on translating literary works, as well as meaning shifts in translating such works into Arabic to transfer the intended meaning to the TL audience. Then, a selection of John Donne's poems was analyzed from multiple perspectives, including linguistic, cultural, and theological frameworks, to assess how accurately and effectively the metaphysical themes can be transferred from English to Arabic. Finally, a proposed rendering was provided by the researchers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is grounded in literary translation theory, focusing on the shift of meaning and transformation when transplanted from one culture to another, by taking Eugene Nida's concept of dynamic equivalence and Lawrence Venuti's theories of domestication and foreignization, this study explores how Donne's metaphysical poetry, rich in Christian theological references, encounters momentous cultural and linguistic barriers when translated into Arabic, where the differences between Islamic and Arabic poetic conventions are quite distinct.

Nida (1964) highlights the importance of dynamic equivalence in capturing the intended message when translating complex poetry forms. (Nida, 1964) This is a school of translucency, Chu (1988), in which the translator seeks not to replicate Slavic literality or Western English literariness in Chinese but rather

docility as much. The fundamental idea was *mistämo last* (as most sensible it is) applicable: literally. Translators need to find somewhere between preserving the message and feeling of what they are translating while adjusting it for language reasons that might cause problems in a culture other than their own.

Lawrence Venuti's theory, on the other hand, focuses more on the roles of time and place: K culture within the target system (domestication), or foreign elements preserved from t K (translation). The adoption of these perhaps competing strategies into the target literature has a major bearing on how much of source culture survives or is recast into something radically different, especially so with Donne's poetry which contains complex metaphors and themes in theology. (Venuti, 1995, p.25)

Also, the concept of cultural untranslatability 'is important in translating metaphysical poetry. This idea revolves around the recognition that some cultural symbols and themes from one language will have no ready equivalent in another. Donne's work, suffused as it is with Christian theology and metaphysics, therefore requires translators to render those aspects for Arabic ears (coming from a different religious and cultural tradition). Al-Jurjani (1954), has the view that 'The untranslatability of certain cultural and religious symbols are a major obstacle to translating metaphysical poetry' (Al-Jurjani, 1954).

## **Discussion**

### **Poem 1: "Death, be not proud"**

'Death, be not proud' is one of Donne's most familiar poems. In which death is viewed as an entity devoid of ultimate power. The poem begins with an apostrophe to death, challenging its supposed superiority: "Death," the opening couplet of the sonnet reads; 'Do not be proud, although some call you "Thee" / Mighty and dreadful, you not are either.' In the Arabic translation of "Death Be Not Proud," scholars have noted the shift from an individualistic defiance against death to a more communal, faith-based interpretation. Dickins (2016) observes that Arabic translations of the poem emphasize death as a transition rather than a finality, better aligning with Islamic views of the afterlife and reshaping the tone from confrontation to a spiritual journey, an adaptation Al-Safi (2017) argues may change Donne's original intent but makes the poem more accessible. Hasan Ghazala (1995) also underscores how translators grapple with Donne's metaphorical complexity. He suggests that Islamic perspectives on communal readings of death in Arabic literature influence how translators like Muhammad Enani render metaphysical themes. According to Ghazala, while preserving Donne's philosophical depth, Enani's translation transforms the defiant tone into acceptance, connecting more closely with an Arab audience's theological stances. However, by streamlining some concepts and layering complexity into longer,

winding sentences in other parts, Enani's interpretation remains insightful to scholars while showcasing the poetic artistry with which great translators weave cultural adaptation.

### **Proposed Rendering:**

الموت، لا تتفاخر، لأنك لست بالقوي المخيف كما تعتقد

### **Poem 2: "Batter my heart, three-person'd God"**

The translation of 'Batter my heart three-person'd God' will take into account the Christian trinity, a concept not directly corresponding to Arabic. In 'Batter my heart, three-person'd God,' Donne uses vivid and violent imagery to express his spirituality and make a plea for renewal. The poem opens with the lines, 'Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for You / As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend,' which speak out the poet's longing for a radical intervention by the divine. The translation of 'Batter my heart three-person'd God' will take into account the Christian trinity, an image not straightforwardly translatable into the Arabic cultural context. The term 'three-person'd God' refers to the Christian trinity, a cornerstone of Christian thought that has no easy equivalent in Arabic. A hypothetical version might read:

**You have destroyed my heart, O God who is triune. You have struck with power as never before.**

The phrase 'God of the Holy Trinity' "يا اله الثالث المقدس" raises a unique theological issue, as the notion of the Trinity is not known in Islamic belief: it instead stresses pure monotheism (tawhid). A translator faces a critical dilemma: whether to stay within the original Christian realm or adapt to Islamic monotheism, thus potentially changing this poem's spiritual intensity.

Translating a poem such as "Batter My Heart" poses unique problems, especially regarding the Christian concept of the Trinity which differs from Islamic theology. As Venuti (1995) notes, translating the phrase "three-person'd God" into Arabic often requires adjusting to monotheistic beliefs or a more literal but theologically disconnected rendition. Al-Jurjani (1954) argues these theological incongruities necessitate unavoidable shifts in meaning when transferring metaphysical Christian references to Islamic contexts. The critic Al-Jurjani further elaborates that such translations may resonate differently among Arabic audiences. For instance, in Al-Hamdani's (2010) work he observes translators like Salma Khadra Jayyusi faced the dilemma of retaining the Christian imagery and risk alienating readers or adapting it to Islamic references thereby altering the original's spiritual intensity. Jayyusi opted to keep the literal Trinity translation but softened the tone emphasizing spiritual transformation over theological precision to make it

more palatable for Arab audiences. This case serves to remind us that differences in religious and cultural background often influence how a translation is perceived and understood. To English readers, Donne's fervent supplication is intensely personal and Christian. It invokes the Trinity: 'Drown my heart then, whatever way you choose.' In Arabic, the displacement of such images might lead to a broader understanding of the divine conflict. Here, spiritual renewal is emphasized without any specific mention of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

**Proposed rendering:**

هدم قلبي، يا إله الثالوث المقدس، واضرب بقوة كما لم تفعل من قبل

**Poem 3: "The Good-Morrow"**

In "The Good-Morrow." Donne contemplates the transformative power of love. Here, the proper balance must be struck between fidelity and freedom in translation if we are to preserve an emotional and spiritual depth (Baker, 2011). In his poem 'The Good-Morrow', Donne explores a love that is transformative and total. The first two lines of the poem, "I wonder by my life what you and I / Did, until I loved?", are a kind of awe before a powerful force that art (or love) can bring into one's world. In The Good-Morrow, we see Donn using love itself as both subject and object. If his poetry is to maintain the same emotional and spiritual depth when translated from other languages into English, one must take great pains (Baker 2011) to do so.

The contemplative tone remains, but the rhetorical style has a slightly different hue to make it more suitable for an Arabic ear. Emphasizing love with the divine power of transformation reflects much in Arabic literary tradition that regards and loves it person creates mini-tabloid experiences; in many love affairs, there is such sharing, half mental and half physical (Dickins et al., 2016). In Arabic, the expression providing the poem's opening about love maintains intact its contemplative elasticity even as it shifts its emotional weight. This shift in the translation uses Arabic culture's tradition of romantic and mystical poetry to withdraw it from abstract reverie into some precise act as only language (of prayers, songs) unique as Arabic could synonymize and homologize, giving the poem new depths (Dickins et al., 2016).

**Proposed rendering:**

أتساءل، والله، ماذا فعلنا أنا وأنت، حتى أحببنا؟

## **Conclusion**

We conclude that the translation of John Donne's poetry from English into Arabic intensifies the complex nature of literary translation. Shifts in meaning are due to cultural, religious, and linguistic factors, which in the aggregate lead to a unique interpretation of the source text. Although a translator aims to remain as faithful as possible to an original text, translation is essentially an act of transformation. This Research Shows that, When John Donne's metaphysical poems are translated from English into Arabic, the significance changes significantly depending on cultural, religious, and linguistic factors. The transformations show how complicated the relationship is between source text and target text; thus, they also illustrate a translator's role in bridging cultural abyss components carefully: He needs respect for each tradition's twist in form and content. Our findings serve as a reminder that both languages must be understood deeply and the different theological traditions and backgrounds apply for this reason, we have been working intensively since: The metaphysical poetry keeps both its emotional and intellectual depth in whatever language or place you live.

This study seeks to signify the importance of understanding regional and linguistical subtleties in translating metaphysical poetry. By studying how Donne's poem has changed meanings on different occasions, the study makes it clear that translation serves as a bridge between cultures. It makes it possible for people across various traditions to better appreciate literary works in these languages theirs Al-Safi's (2017) argues that modern translation theories need to consider how meaning shifts between languages and cultures (Al-Safi, 2017).

Translation enhances not only the language and culture of the source materials but also opens up dialogue and interpretation unconfined by boundaries to both sides. It not only enables readers to have access to the world's literature in all its diversity but helps across cultures, with sympathy and understanding for all. Finally, Venuti's translational model of domestication and foreignization is applicable in translating John Donne's poems in Arabic.

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