

Revisiting Cultural and Discursive Practices through Translating Ahmed Lamsyeh's Anthology Bladi

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Abstract

Zajal poetry has been associated with music and entertainment since it emerged in the twelfth century. It may have been shared orally in the past but not documented by critics and anthologists due to its vernacular use of the language. This led to its obscurity until a new wave of zajal poets emerged in the late twentieth century in Morocco and other parts of the Arab world. They revitalized this tradition with fresh viewpoints that addressed various cultural, social, and ideological aspects. However, it did not obtain the appropriate scholarly recognition. This work aims to reveal some cultural and discursive practices by translating a poem from Lamsyeh's zajal anthology Bladi. The translation in this study utilizes a meaning-based approach to analyze the source material from linguistic, cultural, and postcolonial perspectives. It has been determined that certain culturally loaded terms and proverbs are somewhat un-translatable. Furthermore, this text reveals ideologies that raise problems and contradictions faced by the East in regard to both the West and the East itself.

1. INTRODUCTION

The written zajal poses a challenge to Standard Arabic's monopoly over literate culture, which represents nothing less than a linguistic revolution. Thematically, zajal has often served as a vehicle for political critique. During the 1970s and 1980s, zajal had strong political involvement, arising from a highly charged political period in Morocco and the wider Arab world. This era saw Marxist movements striving for political and social transformation under post-colonial rulers, while also showing support for the Palestinian issue (Elinson, 2013). As time went on, zajal threw off its political mantle to explore more aesthetically focused and experimental poetic realms (Miller, 2017). Nonetheless, zajal forms what can only be called

resistance to dominant representations that occur in two ways: when devalued linguistic strategies and genres are practices despite denigration, and when these devalued practices propose or embody alternate models of the social world. As Finnegan (2013) states, it is important to emphasize, though, that the mere act of writing something down, and even publishing it, does not necessarily mean that it represents an example of writing or literate culture” (p. 70). Not every written zajal is automatically regarded as a part of the literary tradition. Furthermore, it should not be regarded as a completely accurate representation of orally conceived and created literature.

Zajal poets actively participate in discussions and debates about the status of Darija and the literary value of contemporary Moroccan zajal, as previously mentioned. As the most natural linguistic register for a Moroccan reader, both in terms of expression and understanding, the zajal community considers Darija more valuable and more prestigious in a zajal setting. This study illuminates a long-forgotten literary practice, and that is for many reasons. Through translating a zajal poem entitled “بلادي يا لمزوقة من برة اش خبارك من الداخل” written by Ahmed Lamsyeh, this paper examines the linguistic challenges posed by the terminology and the style of the poem, which have presented certain obstacles to the translation process. Subsequently, it endeavours to analyze some cultural phenomena, such as idiomatic expressions and proverbs, that occur in the translated text. This paper also discusses the themes found in Lamsyeh’s zajal poem, which have a relationship with the discursive practices between power and agency. This analysis examines some voices of opposition and elements that the official history marginalizes from the writer's perspective.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MOROCCAN ZAJAL

According to Elinson (2017), people frequently recognize contemporary Moroccan zajal as an original art form that effectively conveys and embodies the essence of Moroccan culture (p. 192). Indeed, the pursuit of its genuine national identity is precisely what motivated authors like Abbass El Jirari to embark on his ambitious and significant work on the Moroccan zajal. This book is the first comprehensive scholarly examination of modern Moroccan zajal. For El Jirari, “folk literature provides an image of the national character; that is clearer than the image that is reflected in cultured, educated literature” (Elinson, 2013). Despite El Jerari’s interest in Moroccan colloquial literature and his noble desire to subject it to rigorous scholarly study, his project is predicated on an opposition between high and low, lettered and unlettered, national and transnational. Having looked at many poems, such as those of Ahmed Lamsyeh, on his official website and in his anthologies, zajal poetry tackles diverse subject matters, including some universal themes, namely love, passion, humanism, politics, and others. In

addition, this type of art addresses some cultural topics, ranging from cultural identity to cultural rituals and practices.

Amara (2004) affirms that the significance of Standard Arabic in the Arabic renaissance of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as its association with pan-Arab nationalist ideology and the unification of the Arabic language has solidified its position as the dominant linguistic form (pp. 143–45). Furthermore, Standard Arabic has been utilized in the construction and representation of diverse social and cultural identities such as nationalism and ethnicity (Kroskrity, 2009). As a result, Standard Arabic holds a prominent status within the linguistic hierarchy. This hierarchy is consistently reinforced at educational institutions, places of worship, media platforms such as television and radio, and various other contexts. Although there was some level of acceptance of non-classical forms during the medieval period, it is contended that the modern age has experienced a strengthening of ideological resistance against incorporating vernacular forms into literary circles. The contemporary system of education remains based on various forms of categorization and standardization. Bourdieu and Thompson (1992) argue that this system has contributed to the devaluation of popular modes of speech, labeling them as "slang" or "gibberish," while simultaneously imposing acknowledgment of the genuine language (p. 242).

Paradoxically, the prevailing perception of zajal as a folk form is considered to be "authentic." Morocco has faced significant challenges over the course of the last thirty years of the twentieth century. Moroccan zajal poets themselves aim to establish legitimacy for zajal as a poetic style that is generally recognized and considered in parallel with poetry written in Standard Arabic as well as other established literary languages such as French or English (Elinson, 2013). The focus is on the deliberate placement of modern Moroccan zajal within a broader literary context, particularly in terms of how zajal poets and critics perceive its production, publication, and performance. In the Moroccan context, the topic under consideration is not wholly novel, but it has only recently gained significant attention in the media, on television, and among academic communities (Zuhur, 2001). Zajal, in one form or another, has existed for a considerable period of time, dating back to at least the tenth century. Some of the oldest instances of the zajal may be traced back to this time (Monroe, 2007).

In brief, considering the apparent stability of the linguistic situation, Ennaji (2005) confirms that Moroccan Darija is progressively observed in situations and forms that have historically been linked with Standard Arabic (p. 58). In the realm of writing and topics pertaining to writing and literacy, there is a noticeable erosion or, at the very least, a

transformation occurring in the perceived dichotomy between Standard Arabic and Darija. The poets do not aim to completely replace Standard Arabic with Darija. However, at various levels, language change is taking place in Morocco. This includes top-down policy decisions and academic discussions regarding the feasibility and appropriateness of incorporating Darija into written texts and official discourse (Sadiqi, 2003). However, the written and published zajal constitutes a threat to the monopoly of Standard Arabic over the literate culture, and this challenge signifies nothing short of a linguistic revolution. Thematically, zajal poems have frequently functioned as a means for political critique.

3. FROM LINGUISTIC CONSTRAINTS TO CULTURAL PHENOMENA

It is evident that zajal poets actively participate in discussions and arguments over the position of Darija and the status and literary significance of modern Moroccan zajal poetry. Within a zajal community, Darija is regarded as the most authentic and esteemed linguistic register for Moroccans, both in terms of expression and comprehension (Zuhur, 2001). As discussions surrounding the suitability of Darija for writing continue in Morocco, zajal community is quietly, yet forcefully, making the point that Darija is capable of written expression and that it is no longer to be limited solely to the spoken register. Indeed, writing in Darija creates some challenges when translating it. When encountering linguistic expressions unique to a specific region or those lacking equivalent in the target language, these challenges become consciously apparent.

In his first zajal poem, Lamsyeh uses “بلادي يا لمزوقة من برة اش خبارك من الداخل” as a title, which has been translated as “My country, oh you who are embellished outwardly, How do you fare inwardly?” Despite numerous unsuccessful attempts to translate this title into an equivalent proverb, the above suggestion has been proposed to at least give the reader a sense of its meaning. Going line by line with this poem, the Arabic version of Lamsyeh, most of the time, respects the rhyme, as the majority of the text follows this pattern: AA BB CC occasionally repeats certain rhymes, making it nearly impossible for the translation to capture this musicality. As previously noted, the primary goal of this translation is to convey the intended meaning. For this reason, many linguistic problems arise while dealing with such texts of Lamsyeh. An attempt has been made to identify the terminological, lexical, and stylistic problems.

Certain terms in the translated poem were transcribed despite their significant symbolism and potency in Darija. This is primarily due to the English language's limited ability to provide suitable equivalent words for these terms. For example, the text contains the term *mkadem*, which has been transcribed. In English culture, there is no equivalent for this word,

which refers to an official whose job is to survey a certain neighbourhood and who is supposed to know everything that is going on around, has no equivalent in English culture. His presence in this context is crucial since he is one of the representatives of the ruling power, *makhzen* within Moroccan society. Lamsyeh uses in the first *zajal* poem a sound that has been transcribed as *aha*. This latter actually expresses a lot of suffering and lamentation. The context reveals the poet's deep sorrow for the people portrayed. The repetition of this sound over and over emphasizes the writer's sadness.

Another word that has been transcribed is “التعريجة”. *Ta'arija* is a musical instrument that resembles the goblet drum but is smaller. Lamsyeh employs the colours of this instrument as a metaphor for the country, implying that it shares the same decorations as the instrument. The poem also frequently repeats the term *sobha*. In a religious context, Muslims employ a necklace of ninety-nine agates, known as *sobha*, to count the number of repeated prayers. The emphasis on this symbolism and its mention in various contexts validate the Islamic ideology prevalent in Muslim countries. Thus, some Muslims today seem to care more about appearances than the essence. The text mentions other religious, or rather Sufi, words like *jadba* and *hadra*.

Jadba and *hadra* are associated with Sufism. Both of these allude to the circumstances in which members of certain Muslim cults form a circle and begin reciting poetry in praise of the prophet. Gradually, individuals experience a state of ecstasy where they perceive themselves as being in closer proximity to God than they have ever been. Using both terms in a single sentence, Lamsyeh states:

Oh my country, you're an abode for festivities and oppression

بلادي بلاد الزرود و القهرة

Oh my country, you're an abode for jadba and hadra

بلادي بلاد الجدبة و الحضرة

In the two lines above, juxtaposition between feasts and oppression is made by the poet, and he follows this juxtaposition by *jadba* and *hadra*. The writer clearly conveys that the country he describes is one of ambivalence.

Other terms in the texts have, to some extent, religious symbolism. These are the words *tayamum*, *fkih*, and *ghonna*. The first word, as it is known among Muslims, refers to the alternative of ablution when water is absent. The term *fkih*, then, has stronger symbolism in Islam. This term designates a person who guides Muslims in their prayers or specializes in *fikh*, a branch of Islamic jurisprudence. The writer views the latter as someone who has abandoned all religious affiliations, donned a belt, and transformed into a dancer. Last but not least, *ghonna*

is what can be explained as nasalization, or simply the sound that is articulated through the nose.

The poet effectively illustrates his focus on contradictions throughout almost the entire poem. In this *zajal* poem, Lamsyeh uses the term *jahilit*, which refers to the era before the coming of the prophet Mohamed. This word is used as follows:

*Oh my country, you are full of mosques and gin mills
From the jahilit era to America its borders run.*

بلادي بلاد جوامع و البيران
حدودها من الجاهلية حتى للميريكان

The *jahilit*, which refers to a period of time, is beautifully placed next to America, which is a place. Lamsyeh encourages readers and listeners to envision a nation immersed in an array of contradictions, with its borders extending from one of the most recent and civilized land discovered to a very distant point in history.

Throughout the poem “بلادي يا لمزوقة من برة اش خبارك من الدخل”, Lamsyeh stresses religious jargon. By doing so, the schizophrenia that the Moroccan society experiences in its daily life is well-uncovered. Other words used in this context include *qibla*, *latif*, and *msalla*. *Qibla* refers to the direction in which Muslims head when they pray. The latter is indicated in the first poem in the situation of a funeral for a country that died while they were arranging its funeral. In this sense, Lamsyeh says:

*And the latif, your people are reciting
its silver, my country is eroding
And myths, your people are telling
My country is so dear, tears my eyes have shed for
And its nest by the stream has been taken
They washed its body by its tears and cut out its shroud,
and put it in front of the qibla
Queuing next to it, each has a look*

Lamsyeh mourns the demise of his nation in these lines, metaphorically comparing it to a lifeless body preparing for burial and undergoing the process of washing and dressing in grave attire. The second word is *latif*. It is one of the names of the Almighty God, which literally means the protector of all creatures. The context in which Lamsyeh mentions it reveals a deeper meaning. When Lamsyeh uses the imagery of people reciting *latif*, he culturally refers to some prayers Muslims recite when they are in danger. The third term, *msalla*, refers to a square that is mainly reserved for the prayers of the two Muslim main religious feasts.

4. SOME DISCURSIVE PRACTICES: THE SUBALTERN AND VOICES OF OPPOSITION

To begin with, it is worth quoting Spivak's (2010) well-known essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" as follows:

Some of the most radical criticism coming out of the West today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West or the West as Subject. The theory of pluralized 'subject-effects' gives an illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often providing a cover for this subject of knowledge. Although the history of Europe as subject is narrativized by the law, political economy, and ideology of the West, this concealed subject pretends it has 'no geo-political determinations. (p. 24)

This excerpt conveys the message that power and ideology shape reality. Therefore, one can reflect on a variety of disciplines. Consideration of literature raises the question: why is Taha Hussein a well-known writer while Lamsyeh remains relatively unknown? Yet, the two writers might have many common points when they write for the purpose of expressing the self and the beauty of the language as well. Moreover, in literature, be it written in a standardized language or in a dialect, there is usually a question that the author defends. Also, when analyzing literary texts, some voices of opposition are usually present.

This section highlights the voices of opposition, particularly those of the subaltern, often perceived as the voiceless or the silenced. Throughout the poem, Lamsyeh expresses himself as a free bird singing for nature. In many instances, he is found uncovering some serious issues that only poeticism and literature can express with fewer restrictions. Lamsyeh's *zajal* heavily emphasizes the conflict between social classes and the oppression that the rich class often imposes on the poor as he discusses his homeland. Lamsyeh, in this poem, laments the life of a poor peasant who takes care of a land since he farms it well to the extent that he has made a well of his eyes and waters it. After he finishes, a rich man comes and collects the crop. This is well-illustrated when Lamsyeh says:

And the second Aha,

For the owner who the farmer harvested his crop yield.

He made a spring and sprinkled it from his eyes.

He worked by heart in the harvest, so did he cognize.

The owner then collected the fruits, so did he seize.

و الثانيةاها على

الي زرع الزراع غلثو

ومن عينو دار ساقية و سقاها

و قلبو حطو وسط الدرسة و دراها

وجا هو و جمع الحصيصة و اداها

The rich in such a society sometimes consider themselves privileged since the poor can get everything ready for the rich, and the poor's existence lies in the rich's money. Lamsyeh supports his position in defending the low social class through his country's description. In this setting, the latter has no rights to enjoy what a normal citizen would. This becomes clear while saying:

In this world, oh my country, the right of the poor is lost

In this world, oh my country, there is no life no rest.

Furthermore, the categorization of social classes in this zajal poem surpasses the complexity of Marxist stratification. In this regard, Lamsyeh categorizes social classes according to wealth. He divides people into five categories, as can be observed in the following:

He who is poor under trees they rest

مول العشرة بايت تحت شجرة

He who is wage-earning is sunk in debt

مول العشرين بايت غارق دين

He who is rich is counting and lost

مول الالف تا يحسبو تالف

He who is wealthy is counting with his turban down,

مول الكيران بايت يحسب و راسو عريان

Here are slave girls tickling him, and here are valets

ها لجواري يهروه ها لغلمان

He who is a billionaire is a crazy blighter

مول المليار راجل مطيار

This excerpt's categorization of social classes suggests that almost no one is living in peace in the poet's home country. Some are always in need, while others are in debt, and the ones who have a lot of money live a life full of insanity. In the same way, the lives of the poor are associated with darkness and the absence of light. In this context, Lamsyeh portrays the impoverished as individuals who draw attention from others by turning on the light during daylight hours, a practice typically reserved for those without access to electricity. "And if I turned on the light in daylight, it was bred by the darkness of the slum," says Lamsyeh in the poem.

Providing job opportunities to the impoverished can enable them to live with dignity. Joblessness is another problem that Lamsyeh has unveiled through his skilful use of words in an artistic way. The first poem takes us to a scene where a father thinks of his children and describes them as either scattered abroad or astray in the streets. In this context, the following lines can be considered:

Some are thrown away abroad

شي فداك البر ملاوح

Some are being imprisoned

شي فزناقي سارح

Some are in the streets unsettled.

شي فزناقي سارح

This description provides insight into the potential fate of the youth in Lamsyeh's depicted nation. In such a place, confronting reality worsens the destiny of jobless individuals as described below:

*What an act they did for the fellows
To Paris, they sold them with wares*

اش هاد العملة داروها للدراري
باعوهم مع الخضر تلباري

This instance suggests that jobless youth have transformed into commodities exported to Paris. This transformation occurs under the guise of offering them job opportunities, but for the poet, it represents a form of dehumanization. Joblessness affects not only those without formal education or those with a basic education, but also those with diplomas and certificates. Lamsyeh asserts that many qualified young people are wasting their time due to a lack of opportunities provided by their country to invest in their educational achievements. For the Moroccan society, one of the clichés that justifies not giving jobs to diploma holders is that they lack experience.

It is not only the people who suffer in the country of Lamsyeh, but also the country itself. Lamsyeh in this zajal poem affirms it in a direct way when he says:

*My country is a short oppressed colt
In my country, they bear false witness*

بلادي دحيش قصيور محقور
بلادي شاهدين فيها بالزور

Oppression in this instance is a reciprocal act that both people and the country experience. The question to be raised here is: Who is responsible for such situations? An allusion is used in the poem to illustrate this point more; wherein Lamsyeh uses the style of George Orwell in his masterpiece *Animal Farm* when he gives the example of the owl which has reigned over the eagle, knowing that the owl is worthless while the eagle is a symbol of power and supremacy. This leads us to the idea that value has been given to the wrong ones. Worse than this is that once someone is oppressed in this country, people never give them importance and see that only the back ranks which fit them.

5. BEYOND THE MAINSTREAM: REWRITING CULTURAL HISTORY FROM BELOW

Historians have always documented history using so-called scientific methods that are as "objective" and methodological as possible. However, Vansina (1985) asserts that the current trend involves examining histories through oral histories and literary texts, which reveal numerous hidden realities (pp. 27–28). Literature writers typically employ symbolic allusions

to historical events, which require interpretation for reconstruction. In this section, the focus is going to be on revisiting the cultural history in Lamsyeh's zajal poem. In this text, Lamsyeh discusses the relationship between the East and the West, specifically the glorification of Westerners by Easterners and the disunion of Arabs, which weakens them and increases the power of the West in comparison. Last but not least, strangeness and burning overseas are also points of history that Lamsyeh mentions in his poem.

In postcolonial studies, the East-West relationship is the focal point for all that is concerned with answering back the West. As mentioned before, Spivak shows in her essay how the West has modeled the picture of the East in the colonial era (Spivak, 2010). Yet, with her and other scholars, a full awareness has reached the academia to try to revisit this complex relationship. Therefore, a dire need to look at histories from below has risen. Despite the effort, ex-colonized countries still suffer from the control of the colonizer. One of the Moroccan clichés refers to the idea that colonization has gone out through the windows but entered again through the doors. Another argument suggests that people who experienced colonialism underwent a transition from minor colonization to major colonization. Examining former colonizing nations, particularly those in the Western world, frequently reveals this phenomenon.

According to popular belief, the finest things originate from the Western regions. Given the current treatment of Westerners in once-colonial nations, one could argue that these nations reserve the best for the West. It is readily apparent, based on the observations made by tourism organizations, that the presence of blond-haired visitors is indicative of the provision of superior services and the highest levels of greeting and hospitality. Lamsyeh asserts that Western tourists, or *laguouer*, have surpassed the locals in strength. He uses the word “فرعنو” *fara'ano* so as to compare them with the pharaohs, who are the best prototypes when it comes to power and strength. The country of Lamsyeh has a really complex relationship with the Other, whether they are from America or the Gulf countries. This can be observed as follows:

America is pregnant craving

permit it play on my country

*In my country, bring the plagued tourists to
mock*

The honky is sham, my country for him is a relief

Our brothers in sand and gas want to enjoy life

الميريكانتيتوحم

اعطيوه يلعب على بلادي

التوريستالمجرب جيوه يطنز فبلادي
الراس لشهب مدقوق تفك خبالو بلادي

خوتنا في الرمل و ليسانس بغاو يزهاو

ها البورديل في بلادي

Oh my country, you are full of brothels

As it can be deduced from these lines, Lamsyeh depicts American people as a woman who is pregnant in her first months when she feels normally that she needs some specific things without knowing why. He delineates the tourists in a dark black image. He sees that tourists come to his country just to mock its inhabitants and take from it whatever they like. On the other hand, he talks about our brothers, who are famous for sand and gas, or as they are named oily Sheikhs by the Americans, who are people who come from the Gulf countries. As it is known, in some Gulf countries, "Islam" is not as superficially "practiced" as it should be; this is to mean that they do not have outlets where they can enjoy the nightlife and get some personal satisfaction. For this reason, they come to Lamsyeh's country to enjoy their time in the brothel among beautiful half-nude women.

In brief, history, as a matter of fact, is to be revisited so as to shed light on some facts that could not be found in the official written version. It is sometimes found that the past exists in orality and some marginalized texts and archives that historians tend to neglect as they do not go hand in hand with their editorial line. Therefore, it cannot serve the agenda that is dictated to them while documenting a certain period of time. In this particular part, the focus has been on historical "facts" as seen from the perspective of Lamsyeh. This zajal poet's perspective offers insight into the link between the East and the West. In contrast to what is propagated through the media, Lamsyeh does not discuss the achievements that the Arab countries have fulfilled, but he considers them factors that weaken each other and that ally with foreigners as they give them the chance to make the Arabs weaker and more submissive. Last but not least, the experience of immigrants in the country of Lamsyeh has been reversed, as they were represented as people who dream of their homeland.

6. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A NEW DEFINITION OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

This paper begins by exposing the idea that the translated material is part of the literary texts that have been put into oblivion because of the variety of the language in which it is written. Thanks to the new trend of cultural studies, such texts have started to gain some importance in the academic sphere. The article aims to explore the translation of historical and cultural viewpoints in Lamsyeh's zajal poetry, focusing on voices from marginalized groups. The paper approaches this objective from various perspectives, taking into account its structure. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of Moroccan contemporary zajal from multiple perspectives. The analysis then shifts to the linguistic issues that arose during the

translation process, the cultural phenomena the text imposes as part of its authenticity, and the discursive practices in the poem.

It has been found that the translation of this type of text allows students to discover new practices that can enrich academia through some deep and complex ways of expressing the self from a position that is hardly noticed. Writing in a spoken language enhances the potency of messages, as it's a daily practice. In the Moroccan context, the written form of zajal is Darija, the native language of this country. As a matter of fact, this variety quickly evolves, sometimes becoming more complex for the native speakers themselves. Zajal poets assert that they have participated directly in talks and arguments on the position of Darija as well as the importance and status of modern Moroccan zajal literature. The zajal community views Darija as more significant and respectable in a zajal environment since it is the most natural language register for a Moroccan, both in terms of expression and understanding.

Translating texts that are spoken or written in Darija has become a cultural need as they can address a larger readership. Working on zajal as a case study opens readers' eyes to some elements of the language that they cannot access if they limit themselves to the standard language since it is short of expressing some cultural phenomena such as the use of proverbs and idioms. Yet, if the translator does not have any cultural background in the source language, s/he would face difficulties conveying the whole meaning of the phenomena included in the original text. There are some significant purposes for translating this type of text, such as making a culture universal and giving advantage to the source text culture to cross borders and contribute to intercultural dialogue. This paper explores the necessity of revisiting marginalized history to unearth intentionally overlooked moments in the context of cultural translation.

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