

***Arberry's Rendition of Imru'al Qays' Mu'allqa:  
Translation and Gender Issues***

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**Abstract**

In the present paper, I attempt to tackle the potentiality of translating the pagan poetry of pre Islamic Arabia instantiated in Arberry's translation of Imru' al Qays' Ode (henceforth, al-M'uallaqa). I also aim at gauging the appositeness of the strategy chosen by the translator, namely, literalism in rendering- the text with the poetic density it accrues-into English while enshrining its fullest ethnographical and socio-cultural charge. My paper probes the following questions: How much constructive was Arberry's literalism in unraveling the complexities of the anthropological and ethnographical make up of al-Mu'allqa? And how much prejudiced was the portrayal of women in al-Mu'allqa? Within the precincts of this research, I come to conclude that Arberry's project realisation was legitimately germane at the artistic plane over and above the socio-cultural one. Through isolating the challenging gender construct at the core of the text of origin while weighing up its bearing on the present translation, this paper comes to validate the sexual objectification/ sexualisation of women in Arab pagan era..

**1. Introduction**

According to Ibn Salim Hanna (1966), the first translation, yet unfinished, of the seven Odes was that of Sir William Jones, published in 1783. Several attempts followed including that of Caussin de Perceval, W. Ablwardts and others. Notwithstanding , the English translator Arberry (1905-1969) was not contented with either translation seeing those endeavours an unwholesome depiction of the Arabian original; being chiefly "paraphrases" rather than translations. (Arberry,

1959). The poetic and ethno-cultural density of Imru' al-Qays' Mu'allaqā makes no translation being able "to convey the masterly sweep of Imru'al-Qays Suspended Ode." (Faris, 1966: 43). As a matter of fact, Arberry considered that it was high time to present the English readers with an undistorted copy of al-Mu'allaqā. The English rendition of Arberry was among the finest for approaching the verses with a high degree of poetic sensitivity, as he aimed at:

"how best to convey in his own idiom the impression made upon his mind by words uttered 14 hundred years ago, in a remote desert land, at the first dawn of an exotic literature." (Arberry: 60).

Arberry noted that al-Mu'allaqā's "original meaning was long forgotten, and a fanciful explanation was invented which subsequent writers repeated and elaborated." (Ibid: 21). Building on that, literalism which roughly means the reproduction, in the most integral manner possible, the same patterns and structure of the original in their entirety, could only be flatly projected as Arberry's alternative when attempting his translation project.

The present paper has as a main objective the review of literalism as a technique in rendering one of the most poetically and culturally reverberating poems: Imru'al-Qays' Mu'allaqā. The paper outlines the overall structure and events of al-Mu'allaqā, and moves on to elaborate on Imru'al-Qays' Mu'allaqā. Then, Arberry's translation is brought out with a special focus on how literalism meets in the finest manner possible the poem's linguistic and socio-cultural exigencies, particularly, the lexicon of nostalgia which defines the quintessence of al-Mu'allaqā. Eventually, the paper ends up by unfolding sexism in al-Mu'allaqā and how women are ruggedly objectified and sexualised all through the poem.

## 2. Al-Mu'allqa: Etymology, Structure and Events

The term Mu'allqa with the multiple senses it triggers off was contentiously discussed amid translators and orientalists. In this regard, Beeston et al (1983: 111) emphasise that:

“al-muallaqat present two problems, one relating to the name itself, the other to the extent and contents of the group...for the prize winning poems ...to be written down and hung up in the ka'bah.”

The German scholar von Kremer, for instance, drew attention to the fact that al-Mu'allqa might most likely originate from the Arabic “allaqa” to mean “transcribe.” (Ibn Salim Hanna: 307). Hence, according to von Kremer, al-Mu'allqa received its appellation after a long tradition of oral transmission that was ultimately materialised into writing. Another view was offered by Sir Charles Lyall who suggested that the origin of al-Mu'allqa stems from “ilk” meaning a precious thing held in estimation (Ibid). Arberry (1959: 22), on the other hand, believes that al-Mu'allqa “can have a quite different connotation”. In the light of the Quran, al-Mu'allqa refers to a woman who is “neither husbandless nor having a husband; left in suspense.” (Ibid). Then, the “suspended” which is the literal translation of al-Mu'allqa might quite well be reminiscent of that particular condition. The plurality of interpretations that the term Mu'allqa sets off is one example that shows the complexity which anticipates any translation of it.

As a standard type of pre Islamic Qasida (poem) selected among the best poems, the structure of al-Mu'allqa is peculiar to it and it divides up into two main parts: *Nasib* segment and *Rihla* segment. (Desomogyi, 1966: 10). *Nasib* announces the arrival of the poet to the campground of his love's tribe to discover much to his distress that she has left the site. Therefrom, *Rihla* (literally the journey) starts on with the poet

lamenting the loss of his love. Oddly enough, such heartache is enacted by the poet recollecting his love conquests and accounts of sexual memories. It is worth noting that the erotic encounters featuring in most of al-Mu'allaaqaat infamously single them out as antisocial in character while the narrative behind them is powerfully tribal notwithstanding. One such instance of the defiant attribute of al-Mu'allaaqa is found in Imru'al-Qays' poem.

By neatly picturing amorous relationships in the Arabian Peninsula, Imru'al-Qays was disclosing the reality of sex underneath the formally and conservatively authorized gender constructions in a tribal society. (Ibid). Admittedly, Imru'al-Qays' Mu'allaaqa ignites, on top of the woe behind a lost love and the passionate reminiscences of carnal love, a narrative of self-glorification and a fervent tribal bond manifest in the lexicon of nostalgia the poet resorts to; the same tribal bond which disheartens him to follow his love's tribe. As a matter of fact, capturing the essence of the anthropological and ethnographical, other than the linguistic, complicacies of al-Mu'allaaqa, made it, for the most part, resist translation.

### **3. Arberry's Translation of Imru'al-Qays' Mu'allaaqa**

The English rendition of Arbery is believed to be among the finest renditions of al-Mu'allaaqa as he approached the verses with a high degree of poetic and linguistic sensitivity, conjuring up as a translation method literalism.

According to Newmark (1988: 81), the major difference between translation methods and translation procedures is "[w]hile translation methods relate to whole texts, translation procedures are used for sentences and the smaller units of language."

It follows that the narrative of translation spreads out panoply of translation techniques propounded by different

translators and scholars in the discipline, chief among them, Nida (1964); Seguinot (1989); and Newmark (1988). (Venuti: 2000).

Speaking of translation strategies or methods, however, nudges us to summon up fewer types. These fall roughly under the banner of two axes (Venuti, 1998:240): 1) domestication also interchangeably referred to as free translation, paraphrase or dynamic equivalence (a target text oriented approach) and 2) literalism also interchangeably referred to as foreignism, metaphrase or formal equivalence (a source text oriented approach).

Discourse on translation often pigeonholes literalism to mechanical translation highlighting its detrimental effects. (Chironova, 2014). Such discourse however, seems to downplay “the existence of common patterns and isomorphic objects in languages.” (Ibid: 31). Besides, literalism as a strategy is also resorted to when the aim of the translation necessitates safeguarding the exactness of the source language wording. Accordingly, literal translation can be defined as: “element by element transfer of semantic and structural components of the SL into TL that does not violate the TL norms or the violation is communicatively justified.”(Ibid: 36)

In view of the forgoing, Arberry’s translation was constructive at many scales, and is hence, defensible for a number of reasons. Visibly, Arberry refused to detribalize and uproot al-Mu’allāqa merely to gratify the conformist taste of his own English culture. Having said that his choice of literalism was largely foreseen, his version was built on a careful revision of previous translations. His strategy was enabling enough to maintain the original lexicon of nostalgia that hallmarked al-Mu’allāqa and which eventually resisted any form of domestication. Such lexicon includes names of places (villages, rivers, valleys, and mountains) as well as different types of

plants that grew where the beloved's tribe once dwelt. These as Stetkevych (1993: 101) states are "key elements of the Arabic poetic lexicon."

The extracts below are taken from Imru' al-Qays' Mu'allaqat<sup>1</sup> to show the poetic and ethnic impetus of the poem<sup>2</sup> and the manner such impetus was carried over into English by Arberry (1959).

a.

قفَا نَبِكَ مِنْ ذِكْرِي حَبِيبٍ وَمَنْزَلٍ

بَسِيقَتِ اللَّوَى بَيْنَ الدَّخُولِ فَحَوْمِلِ

Halt friends both! Let us weep, recalling a love and longing

By the rim of *siqt al-Liwa* between *ed-Dakhool* and *Hawmal*

The above mentioned verse or couplet is an example of the *Nasib* segment which inaugurates the beginning of al-Mu'allaqat. The tribal aura is vividly present right from the outset through the use of three place referents: *Siqt al-Liwa*, *ed-Dakhool*, and *Hawmal*. At this juncture, it becomes central to shed more light on the lexicon of Arabic nostalgia. In his chart of geographical place names –based on the ten odes of al-Mu'allaqat, Habeeb (2015: 51-54) offers the following depiction:

*Siqt al-Liwa*: was the first geographical name used by Imru' al-Qays in the opening couplet of his Mu'allaqat and refers to a sandy place between Mecca and al-Basra; also laba and Banu Yarbu. It was thereafter used by other poets more as a famed "poetic location" than a geographical one.

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<sup>1</sup>Imru' al-Qays is believed to have produced his Mu'allaqat in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.khayma.com>

**Hawmal:** the black clouds that are full of water; also the name of a spring (mentioned in Imru'al-Qays' mu'allaq) whose location no scholar has determined.

**ed-Dakhool:** the name of a campsite near **Hawmal**

Because Arberry captured the significance of lexical nostalgia and the importance of keeping it undamaged, names of places in the translated version are preserved. The transferability of the poem's tribal and poetic timbre is only achievable through keeping the names of the original unspoiled. This is again substantiated in the following verse:

b.

ألا ربَّ يومٍ لك مِنْهُنَّ صالح

ولا سيِّما يومٍ بدارةٍ جُلْجُلٍ

Oh yes, many a fine day, I've dallied with the white ladies, and especially I call to mind a day at Dara Juljul

In his narrative of amorous exploits, the poet mentions the place **Dara Juljul** which comes to be particularly resounding in Arabic poetry. As mapped out in Mu'jam al-Buldan: 360, **Darat Juljul** is the name of a place in Najd that belongs to the tribe of al-Dabab. According to Arberry (33-34), **Darat Juljul** is also the place where the poet was involved in an erotic escapade with his cousin and her friends. As the ladies took off their clothes and entered the pool to bathe, it was then that the daring poet stole their clothes and refused to give them back unless each lady got out of the pool and begged him to give back the clothes and they did as he asked. To celebrate his victory, he slaughtered his camel and treated the girls to a feast. Thereafter **Darat Juljul** was notoriously used by poets more as an erotic escapade and less as a geographical place

#### 4. The Misogynistic Portrayal of Women in Imru'al-Qays' Mu'allāqa: translation and gender issues

In the previous part, we have seen how the lexicon of nostalgia which punctuates al-Mu'allāqa as an ethno-cultural narrative is best enshrined by means of literalism. At present, we will embark with the poet in his *Rihla* segment. This essentially concerns the poet's self-adoration and conceit of his highborn kind and his "serial philanderer" repute. The latter is deliberate in his recollections of his passionate affairs with all sorts of women, including pregnant ones. Consider the following verses:

c.

كَدَأْبِكَ مِنْ أُمِّ الْحَوَيْرِثِ قَبْلَهَا  
وَجَارَتِهَا أُمُّ الرَّبَابِ بِمَأْسَلِ

Even so, my soul, is your wont; so it was with Umm al-Huwairith Before her, and Umm ar-Rabab her neighbour, at Ma'sal

It is noteworthy that the names of women in the English rendition of Arberry are maintained in order to foster the same ambiance of the original. The corporal representation of the women involved in such erotic encounters is accomplished by the use of an array of sensuous and sensual metaphors. This is once more substantiated in the following three verses:

d.

وَبَيْضَةٍ خَدْرٍ لَا يَرَامُ خِبَاؤُهَا  
تَمَتَّعْتُ مِنْ لَهْوٍ بِهَا غَيْرَ مُعْجَلٍ

Many an egg of the curtained quarters, whose tent none dares to seek: I took my pleasure with her, unhurried

e.

مُهْمَهْقَةً بَيْضَاءُ غَيْرُ مُفَاضَةٍ



ترائبها مصقولة كالسجنجل

Shapely and taut her belly, white-fleshed, not the least flabby,  
Polished the line of her breast-bones, smooth as a burnished  
mirror

f.

وجيد كجيد الرئم ليس بفاحش

إذا هي نصته ولا بمعطّل

Her throat like the throat of an antelope, not ungainly  
When she lifts it upwards, neither naked of ornament

The abovementioned verses contain numerous instances of women being metaphorised as types of food or animals, e.g., جيد كجيد الرئم; بيضة خدر (Many an egg of the curtained quarters); (Her throat like the throat of an antelope).

In fact, the woman as food and the woman as animal metaphors are the most universal amidst all kinds of metaphors; hence, their translation being effortlessly processed. The easiness whereby the translation activity is computed, here, is evidenced in the reproduction of precisely the same metaphorical statements in the English rendition. Those verses illustrate best the manner the poet brought into play his love conquests reminiscences to give vent to his erotic imagery which is less perceptible in the *Nasib* segment and more substantial in the *Rihla* segment. This becomes predictable when knowing that there are two types of women in al-Mu'allafa. According to al-Batal (1983) the first woman is the ideal woman; with a reproductive function. It is the one pursued by the poet and whose physical features are fore-grounded. The second is the real woman with whom the poet might have had a physical relationship. The objectification of the woman in al-M'uallafa is blatant; even the "ideal" status of the first beloved does not save her from being reduced to a reproductive function, or else

sexualised and metaphorised as an object or as food or animal. The second woman figures in within the poet's narrative of affairs and fornication with adulteresses such as his affairs with Umm al-Huwayrith and her neighbour Umm al-Rabbab and his affairs with the young ladies at Darat Juljul.

The misogynist character of al-Mu'allafa did not seem to distress the translator's main objective which was to provide the reader with a sticking to the facts version of the original. His source text oriented strategy would entirely excuse his noninterventionist approach. His aim was above all to translate every word and make the rendition Arabian in tone and colour. Besides, the translator was more absorbed with how his version could render in the neatest manner possible the forms and patterns of al-Mu'allafa and less with altering the running thoughts in it. In al-Mu'allafa, it was the artistic plane which championed over the content plane. In this connection, Qudama (1963: 66) contended that:

“the lowliness of the content in itself can in no way detract from the excellence of a poem, just as the bad quality of wood, for example, cannot detract from the perfection of (of the art) of its carpentry.” Therefore, it was form that occupied prime of a place in both the original context and the receptor one and what is at the centre of interest is not the poet' mindset but the crafty manner whereby he puts up his narrative. Being to a great extent absorbed by the aesthetic plane of al-Mu'allafa, Arberry could not stake it to allow himself the freedom to give free vent to his own thoughts and feelings. He was, as it were, spellbound by the conventional patterns required by al-Mu'allafa as a particular case of poetry genre.

## **Conclusion**

Every translator' strategy is the immediate corollary of a particular state of affairs that weighs up the scale of his

interference within the text and the alternatives that he goes for. Through his translation of al-Muallaqa, Arberry endorses literalism which has been slammed by many seeing that it yields to the production of an incomprehensible mass of words. Nonetheless, literalism is also valorised by others (Venutti; Burton, and many more) in the narrative of translation as an antidote to ethnocentrism and racial bigotry. It follows that the preservation of the representative patterns in al-Mu'allqa could only be made possible through literalism. At this point, Arberry in no way wanted to usurp the role of the author; instead, he wanted to draw attention to the author's text as an unparalleled artifact with the wholeness of the tribal and cultural fundamentals contained within it. This, the argument would run, bears out the major reason behind Arberry's source text oriented approach. Having said that the depictions of both women in al-Mu'allqa instruct, and their practice supports, the dominant male-oriented socio-cultural base of patriarchal Arabia, they also unravel some of the most socially frowned upon male/ female relationships by means of their candidness in tackling sexual matters disrupting, hence, the society's feelings of moral complacency. The merit of Arberry's translation project- as the finest among many- stems from the fact that it thrived to enshrine the spirit and soil of al-Mu'allqa with the entire poetic and tribal momentousness its lines set off.

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