

Paul Bowles's Translations from the "Moghrebi" in the Context of the American Counter-culture

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Abstract:

Since the Cultural and Social turns in Translation Studies, strong light has been shed on the critical role that the socio-cultural context of reception plays in the selection of a particular culture, author or a text for translation. As Carbonell (1996) argues, the motivation behind approaching and translating a text stems from the context where this text is going to be read and interpreted. Starting from this assumption, this paper places Paul Bowles's translations of the oral stories of Tangier in the context of the American counter culture post World War II. The objective is to analyze the ways in which the interest and the expectations of the receiving culture during this period have conditioned Bowles's selection and translation of the oral stories of Tangier. Being determined by the socio-cultural context and the expectations of the "Other", the author argues that the translations of the oral stories of Tangier were read and interpreted in line with the reality of the "Other", that is resistance in the context of the American counter-culture instead of resistance at home/ post-colonial Morocco. The paper concludes that translation in such contexts is a form of manipulation, for the intentions of the author and the translator are not the same. Therefore, meaning is "lost" as the text quits its original context of production (postcolonial Morocco) and becomes a novel about the "Other".

Key words: American counter-culture, oral stories of Tangier, Paul Bowles, translation

Introduction

When Paul Bowles, a self-exiled American music composer, fiction writer and traveler, settled in the International Zone of Tangier post World War II, he took up a project of translating the oral stories of a group of young and poor, uneducated men (Mohammed Mrabet, Larbi Layachi, Ahmed Yacoubi, Abdesslam Boulaich and Mohammed Choukri). Bowles transcribed and translated into English their stories which they narrated in Moroccan dialect. The texts were published as "Translations from the *Moghrebi*" (Moroccan language/culture). What renders these texts/translations unique is the fact that they were narrated for the sake of translation. While they emerged from Morocco, they were not directed to the Moroccan reader but to the West and the American reader in particular.

Bowles translated Larbi Layachi's *Life Full of Holes* in 1964, an autobiography disguised as a novel, followed by a translation of Mrabet's *Love with a Few Hairs* in 1967 and *For Bread Alone* (1974) by Mohammed Choukri. For Mohammed Mrabet with whom the American author collaborated extensively, Bowles translated *The Lemon* (1969), *M'Hashish* (1969), *The Boy Who Set the Fire* (1974), "Hadidan Aharam" (1975), *Look & Move On* (1976), *Harmless Poisons, Blameless Sins* (1976), *The Big Mirror* (1977), *The Beach Café & The Voice* (1980), *The Chest* (1983), *Marriage With Papers* (1986), as well as *Translations from the Moghrebi*, by various authors (1986), *Chocolate Creams and Dollars*, by various authors (1992).

The sixties which mark the initiation of the American traveler's project of translation also coincide with the beginning of a major change in the American society. The shift from conservative towards a more liberated culture happened as a result of several social and cultural revolutions, particularly with the formation of the Beats and Hippies counterculture movements who resisted the established American mainstream culture and conservative values post WWII. More importantly, social resistance was also manifested in the field of literature. The later took up previously ignored and tabooed sub-cultural themes of drugs and sexuality in particular (Dichl, 1974). Unsurprisingly, sexual encounter and drug use are among the major themes in the Tangerian oral novels that Paul Bowles translated. *Look and Move on* by Mohammed M'rabet, for example, tackles the issue of sexual encounter between the protagonist native and the American couple "Maria and Reeves" in the International Zone of Tangier. The book also sheds light on the unregulated use of "kif" and alcohol consumption in Tangier during its international days. The same themes are found in M'rabet's *Love with a Few Hairs*, Larbi Layachi's *Life Full of Holes* and Mohammed Choukri's autobiography *For Bread Alone*.

In this paper, the author focuses on demonstrating how Bowles's motivations behind his selection and translation of the oral stories/storytellers of Tangier stem to a large extent from his socio-cultural background and from the context of reception. In this regard, the argument is that even though the oral texts that Paul Bowles translated emerged from the heart of a Moroccan reality (colonial Tangier/Morocco), the texts were determined by another context, reality, and culture: that of the translator and the receiving culture (Post WWII America/the West). In this respect, the paper concludes that the oral stories of Tangier were manipulated in a way that their "original" meaning was "lost in translation" or reconfigured in order to fit within the context of reception and meet the expectations of the "Other"/ the translator and the target audience.

In translation, it is essential to recognize that the translator's choices and selections of a particular text, author, or culture are strongly conditioned by the socio-cultural context of reception, the expectations of the target audience as well as the culture of the translator himself, because, as Alvarez and Vidal (1996) put it, "behind everyone of his [the translator's] selections there is a voluntary act that reveals his history and the socio-political milieu that surrounds him; in other words, his culture" (p.5). In the case of Paul Bowles's translations, the target culture and the culture of the translator are the same, the West/ Postwar America. Therefore, in order to understand the translator's motivations behind selecting the oral stories of Tangier for translation, there is a need to firstly shed some light on the context of reception and the translator's culture.

1. The Context of Reception: The Counterculture in Post-war America

Postwar period in America was a time of revolution and change in politics, economy, society, culture and art. Right after the war, many young people started doubting and opposing to old values, social norms and lifestyles established by mainstream culture. A disillusionment of the youth occurred and encouraged a counter-cultural arousal in the late 1960s. Tensions and protests developed among the new generations regarding the Vietnam War, race relations, sexual mores, women's rights and traditional modes of authority ("Counterculture, nd). Likewise, significant social and cultural movements, and revolutions followed during the sixties, mainly the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, and pop art movement along with the emergence of a counter culture, which lasted from 1964 to 1972 and was characterized by a general rejection of the social and cultural standards of the preceding decade ("Counterculture, nd).

The fifties although generally characterized by conformism, conservatism, and prevailing social taboos ("Postmodern Literature of the USA", nd), it marked the beginning of a new era through the birth of the Beat generation, also referred to as the Beat culture, an anti-conformist social and literary movement that constituted a turning point in American society and literature ("Counterculture", nd). Like the lost generation of WWI, the Beats, namely, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Lucien Carr, and Jack Kerouac, were a group of postwar writers, who, ensuing their disillusionment with postwar American society and its values, started searching and calling for alternative lifestyles and modes of being. They challenged social norms and the traditional notion of family by encouraging alternative forms of sexuality and calling for free experimentation with alcohol and different kinds of drugs ("Counterculture", nd).

The Beats were famous for fighting conformity during a very critical time in American history when social and sexual mores were still highly restrictive. In literature, modernist writers were still compelled to restrict themselves to particular "traditional" themes and language (Pynchon, 1984). Then, a major shift took place in the late fifties thanks to the Beat writers who pushed the boundaries of what was considered common and traditional, and initiated the beginning of a new era in American society and literature (Rahn, 2011) & (Carmona, 2012) placing a sudden and a strong emphasis on the previously ignored and tabooed sub-cultural themes, drugs and sexuality (Diehl, 1974).

Social resistance instigated several social movements and revolutions which provoked radical modifications in the values and principles of the modern world. The sexual revolution of

the 1960s has led to the foundation for a highly "permissive society" (Duiker & Spielvogel, 2015) that was ready to embrace more sexual freedom and experimentation symbolized in the concept of "free love" (Misiroglu, 2009), for example. Similarly, the celebration of drugs as a sign of freedom was embodied in the formation of "a drug culture" characterized by the excessive use and experimentation with drugs ("Counterculture", nd), which contributed to what was known as the psychedelic sixties.

Naturally, sex and drug approaches to art, cinema, music and literature were a manifestation of the rebellious and counterculture artists' quest for liberation from postwar society and illusions. In literature, the Beats have, particularly, played a major role in this radical social and literary shift. Their writings contained shocking elements and language which defied norms in terms of social behavior and what was classified as traditional or mainstream literature. They openly and explicitly brought up themes of homosexuality and drugs, which they advocated and adopted themselves as an act of defiance and quest for freedom ("Counterculture", nd). An example of these critical works of fiction would be William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1959), a novel that Burroughs wrote in Tangier. Burroughs was a homosexual and a drug addict who notably wrote about his experiences. In 1960, he was brought up to trial for publishing works that contained obscene scenes and offensive language ("Counterculture", nd). Another example is Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1957), which was also tried for obscenity and open references to gay sex.

In Paul Bowles's fiction too, sexual encounter with the natives in North Africa constituted a major recurrent theme that served as an embodiment of postwar American character's alienation, their sexual estrangement and sometimes madness and paranoia, as was the case with "Kit" in *The Sheltering Sky* (1949). The novel told the story of an American couple (Port and Kit) who travelled aimlessly through the Algerian Sahara in the hope of escaping the aftermath of the war and resolving their marital problems. Both protagonists, lost and pointless, have sexual adventures with local natives, Port with a young Arab girl, and Kit with two Bedouins. Sexual perversion was strongly manifested through Port fantasizing about his wife while he was in the arms of a local girl. But, probably, Bowles's most shockingly notorious narrative that he wrote in 1947 was "Pages from Cold Point" where he straightforwardly treats the issue of a child's homosexuality and moral corruption. In the story, Mr. Norton, a recent widower, leaves the United States with his sixteen-year-old son, Racky, and settles on a Caribbean island. "The reason for leaving is obscure, but apparently Racky has already made his predilections known, and possibly he has even been involved sexually with his father. If Mr. Norton was hoping that removal from civilization would also remove his son from homosexual encounters, he was wrong, for once there, Racky immediately begins to seduce local boys... the story culminates with Racky entering into an ambiguous sexual liaison with his father (Sawyer-Lauçanno, 2007, 228). More importantly, it was within this context of America post WWII that the oral stories of Tangier that Bowles translated were meant to be received and interpreted. Bowles's translations too had to conform to the expectations and the interest of Bowles's/the translator's audience (his readers and publishers). In a conversation with Alameda (1990), Bowles says that "my publisher would call me once a month to tell me you need to write about sexuality, about drugs" (p.224). With the context of reception in mind, it would not seem surprising at all that Bowles's publisher incited him to emphasize the themes of "drugs" and "sexuality". These were the most "desired" and appreciated issues in the West, where the young

disillusioned generations were searching for new ways to manifest their despair, their rejection and resistance to the authorities and the "mainstream" lifestyle.

2. The Oral Stories of Tangier in the Context of the American Counter-Culture

The oral stories of Tangier could circulate well within that context of the counter culture in America, for they tackled social taboos and themes of "kif" (a substance, especially cannabis, smoked to produce a drowsy state) and "bisexuality", which marked the cultural encounter between the Moroccan natives and foreigners in the International zone of Tangier. The city's unlimited freedom, social corruption and pervert sexual behavior that attracted the American renegades, who escaped to the International Zone following WWII, and corresponded to the counterculture's aspirations, were strongly portrayed in the Tangerian storytellers' representation of the city. Considering and/or comparing Mohamed Mrabet's *Look and Move On*, Larbi Layachi's *Life Full of Holes* and Mohammed Choukri's *For Bread Alone* all prove this fact. Whereas each author dwelt on his own "miserable" life experience and resistance to the social injustice in the underworld of post/colonial Tangier, emphasis on deviant social conduct was a common feature shared by their works, notably their autobiographical texts.

In the same vein, the important role that the International Zone played for the renegades during the postwar period made its oral narratives more welcome in their target culture. Paul Bowles, who probably knew this fact, encouraged the production of these stories. Accordingly, it is safe to claim that the translations of the Tangerian oral stories were actually encouraged, read and interpreted in the context of the social "resistance" that the counterculture was promoting in the US rather than resistance at home, postcolonial Morocco. And this is what we understand from the statement of Allen Ginsberg's (one of the Beat movement founders) when he points out that Ahmed Yacoubi's "kif tales" could be read in the context of "beatnik" and "hippie" social revolutions" (Chandarlapaty, 2009, p. 58). More importantly, this sheds light on the manipulative power that translation exerts over an original text by taking it away from its source culture/original context in order to be interpreted and read according to another reality that is completely foreign to the original author or culture. In such context, translation manipulates "literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting [translation] is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power" (Lefevere 1992: Preface).

The translations of the oral stories of Tangier circulated as "kif tales" in the West because they were read within the context of the "Other". The American drug revolution also known as the psychedelic sixties started with the counterculture in 1960. The psychedelic era refers to the times of the social and artistic change influenced by the huge consumption of the psychedelic drugs in America (Pendergast 2000). It centered on the idea of altered/psychedelic state of consciousness ("The Counterculture", nd) induced by psychedelic drugs (also referred to as LSD). During the sixties and seventies, "LSD" were legal in America and were considered as a major source of artistic inspiration for writers, and artists before being banned by the authorities ("The Counterculture", nd). In a conversation with Rogers (1974), Paul Bowles admits to never have tried "LSD" in his life or for any artistic inspiration. On the other hand, he largely consumed its "Moroccan" counterpart: *kif (hashish)*. In this regard, Rättsch (2005) writes:

The poets of the Beat Generation Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, Paul Bowles—regarded hashish use as an important source of inspiration, and their work has

provided numerous examples attesting to this fact. For the authors of psychedelic generation—Robert Anton Wilson, Robert Shea, Tom Robins, Mohammed Mrabet...smoking hashish was an obvious source of inspiration (p.64).

In this quote, Mohammed Mrabet, one of the main storytellers, whose oral stories Bowles translated into English, was even classified with the American psychedelic generation because he, like a psychedelic artist, turned to drug induced hallucinations in his fiction. His book *M'hashish* is probably the best example, a collection of hallucinatory stories that invoke funny, sometimes absurd, results of being under the effect of *hashish*. In the translator's notes, Paul Bowles defines the word "M'hashish" as "equivalent in Moghrebi of "behashished" or full of "hashish" and the stories as being a description of being in that state, not far from the word "psychedelic" which indicates affecting the mind so that it produces vivid visions.

Using *hashish* and writing about it was a common denominator between the storytellers of Tangier and the Beat writers as well as the translator, Paul Bowles. The oral storytellers were figuratively called "the Beats of Tangier" given the similar characteristics shared between the two groups. Like the Beats, the storytellers represented a young generation who were "beaten up" by social injustice and poverty and who "wrote" outside the mainstream and defied all rules of what was regarded "national"/ Moroccan literature. Like the Beat literature which challenged the traditional norms of literature, the oral stories of Tangier defied the conventions of Moroccan literature by producing texts in *da-ri-ja* (*Moroccan spoken dialect*). This was a huge challenge to the general requirements of Moroccan literature that was written in standard Arabic. Similarly, using informal and sometimes shocking language was a common feature between the two groups.

Following the Beats in America, the storytellers of Tangier brought up very sensitive issues of their society and confidently devoted their texts to the demolition of social taboos and the exposition of the downside and the bitter reality of post/colonial Tangier. What is more, their books, like the Beat literature, were very unwelcome at home. Mohamed Choukri's *For Bread Alone* (1973) faced censorship. The Arabic edition of Choukri's *For Bread Alone* was censored in Morocco before the ban has been lifted in 2000. According to *The Encyclopedia of Censorship*, the book was prohibited for "containing extreme pornographic scenes which do not fit with our [Moroccan] social and religious traditions" (Green & Karolides, 2005). According to the same source, Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* was:

prosecuted or otherwise censored [in America] either in magazine or book form by academic institutions, the U.S Post Office, The U.S. Customs and state and local government" ... The magazine was tried in June 1959. The prosecution claimed that all the material was worthless as literature. The Kerouac was filth-laden gibberish, the Burroughs utterly obscene... the language throughout failed to conform to community standards (Green & Karolides, 2005, p. 370)

Like Choukri's autobiography, Driss ben Hamed Cherradi's (pen name Larbi Layachi) text was a source of trouble for the author who had to leave Morocco before the publication of the French version of his semi-autobiographical novel *Life Full of Holes* (1964). In this regard, Bowles writes:

Once more Larbi was with me as a houseboy. He was growing increasingly nervous about the possible official reactions to the French edition of his book, which Gallimard was publishing shortly. His anxiety, continually expressed, communicated itself to me, and I too began to think it would be better if he were out of the way. I got him a visa for the United State; he left with Bill Burroughs on the Independence, and has never returned to Morocco" (Layachi, 1964, "About the author and the translator")

The American Beats who encouraged strongly Bowles's translations of the oral storytellers have probably seen their own reflection and, more particularly, their resistance to the confines of their society and their quest for freedom in the sufferings of the storytellers and their stories of social struggle. And this is what Hassan (2011) means when he writes that:

Over and beyond the possibility of total "fidelity" at the linguistic level, the work acquires the added dimension of being not only of the culture from which it emerges ...it also becomes a novel about the receiving culture or target culture, since consciously or unconsciously readers look for an image of themselves reflected in the mirror of a foreign novel (p.30).

Certainly a translated novel undergoes some sort of "violence" or reconfiguration when it leaves "home" and becomes a text about the "Other"/ the receiving culture and the target readers who "look for an image of themselves reflected in the mirror of a foreign novel" (Hassan 2011). And this can be one reason why the American Beat writers were very encouraging to the production and translation of the storytellers' oral texts. In his correspondences with Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the publisher of City Lights Books, Paul Bowles (1961) confesses how Allen Ginsberg, one of the Beat writers, has convinced him to translate a collection of legends by Ahmed Yacoubi about *kif* in Morocco (p.332). Similarly, "On October 19, 1961, Ginsberg wrote to Bowles to say: "if you have nothing available, [Lawrence Ferlinghetti] might be interested in 70-100 pps of Yacoubi's [Yacoubi] stories maybe, with comments or intro or reminiscences by you [Bowles]" (Bowles 1961 p. 332).

Encouraging or inciting the storytellers to "write" about specific themes and issues for translation is a clear sign of manipulation from the part of the translator and the publishers alike. It indicates that the Moroccan storytellers were not free to narrate what they wanted and that they simply narrated to meet the expectations of the "Other". In line with the same argument, Bowles admits in another letter to Ginsberg, that his "A hundred Camels in the Court yard", a collection of short stories about *kif* in Morocco, was Ginsberg's idea (Bowles, 1961, p. 332). The same year, Bowles published his translation of Mohammed Mrabet's *M'Hashish*.

Mohamed Mrabet's novel *M'Hashish* (1969) was devoted exclusively to the issues of *kif* and alcohol consumption in addition to sexual encounter in other works like *Love with a Few Hairs* (1967) and *Look and Move On* (1989). When Abdel aziz Jadir, a Moroccan scholar, asked him about the reasons behind limiting the book to these two particular motives, Mrabet's reply was simply because they were the most common issues of the time (Jadir & Mrabet, p. 261). What Mrabet clearly implies in this regard was the general social and multi-cultural condition in the International Zone of Tangier. Particularly, Mrabet refers to his "reality", what he was experiencing through the main traits that characterized everyday life. In his two major works

Look and Move on (1989) and *Love with a Few Hairs* (1968), the protagonists are depicted as being trapped in a colonizing form of sexual relationship with the American couple Maria and Reeves in the first narrative and with the British David in the second. This representation foreshadows the bitter reality that the young Tangerian boys experienced in their relationship with the foreigners who came to Tangier in order to enjoy what was considered illegal at home, mainly, free sexual behavior and unrestricted drug and alcohol consumption.

When put within their (original) postcolonial context, Mrabet's stories of "sex" and "kif" serve primarily in stressing the marginal position and the victimization that the male protagonist/native had to face as a result of poverty and colonization in post/colonial Tangier. Yet, while drug consumption and sexual perversion in the stories of Tangier embody social victimization, in the context of the American counterculture and literature, the same motifs were a symbol of self-empowerment, challenge and resistance. It is in this context as Carbonell (1996) points out "meaning changes inevitably from source to translation. The intentions of the author and the translator differ and are possibly in conflict" (p.87). Indeed, far from the Moroccan post/colonial reality, the texts were made to travel towards a Western context/society and serve another cause which is completely external to the original/ Tangerian situation. This also sheds light on the power that translation wields in modifying the original meaning of translated texts. Pierre Bourdieu, point out Heilbron and Sapiro (2007), observed that "texts circulate without their contexts, a fact which always generates misunderstandings" (p,103). In literary translation, this migration of texts can lead to the reconfiguration of meaning in a way or another so that the purpose of the original text/author is partly or completely altered or even lost as Hassan (2011) explains:

Translation, in other words, is both carried out and received within a domestic discursive field that sets the condition for it and also inevitably lifts the translated work from its original context and reconfigures its meaning. Over and beyond the possibility of total "fidelity" at the linguistic level, the work acquires the added dimension of being not only of the culture from which it emerges ...it also becomes a novel about the receiving culture or target culture, since consciously or unconsciously readers look for an image of themselves reflected in the mirror of a foreign novel (p.30).

And if the target reader, as Hassan (2011) remarks, looks for a reflection of themselves in the foreign novel, it certainly follows that the novel is read and interpreted according to the norms and/or the expectations of the foreign/target culture/reader. In other words, the translated text becomes alien to its original context and reality.

In the particular case of the collaboration between Paul Bowles and the oral storytellers of Tangier, the original authors did not direct themselves to the Moroccan reader. Rather they narrated for translation. And in order to be published and remunerated, they had to emphasize (sometimes with exaggeration) themes of "hashish"/ "kif" and other social taboos which appealed to their audience. In other words, the storytellers were not free to choose or "write" what they wanted or the way they wanted. They were bound by the reality of the "Other" and by the expectations of their translator/ audience. They were encouraged to emphasize certain "realities" and limit themselves to certain "truths" as dictated by the translator/ editor and publisher. "On October 19, 1961, Ginsberg wrote to Bowles to say: "if you have nothing

available, [Lawrence Ferlinghetti] might be interested in 70-100 pps of Jacoubi's [Yacoubi] stories maybe, with comments or intro or reminiscences by you [Bowles]" (Miller, 1994, p. 332). Lawrence Ferlinghetti is the the co-founder of City Lights Booksellers & Publishers. City Lights was a haven for counterculture writers like Allen Ginsberg. It published the works of the Beats and Paul Bowles. Other Non-conformist bookstores that published Bowles's translations of the oral storytellers are Black Sparrow Press and Grove press. They encouraged non-conformist literature after the war and were famous for publishing "outside the mainstream" writers and poets. It is to this audience that the oral storytellers of Tangier mainly directed their texts. Hence, their texts were determined by the culture and the expectations of that audience.

Conclusion

"Writing" for translation or writing for the "Other" certainly brings about issues of manipulation into play. It also brings about attention to voices of marginality, of the colonized/translated other, which are manipulated in different ways within literary commerce (Simon, 2000, p.12). Translation, points out Venuti (1998), "aims to address a different audience by answering the constraints of a different language and culture. Instead of enabling a true and disinterested understanding of the foreign text, translation provokes... an abusive exploitation of originality" (p. 31).

The choice of translating a particular text by any translator is determined by several factors, including the translator's culture, the context of reception, the publishers and "the expectations and behavioral conventions of the target audience" (Baker, 1998, p.104). In the same line, translation wields enormous power in the reconfiguration of meaning to fit within the context of reception and meet the expectation of the target reader. In other words, translation "steals" the original work from its original context in order to accommodate it into the culture of the target reader.

In the case of the oral stories of Tangier, the main problem with this process of moving from one context into the other via translation lies in the fact that these texts were taken away from their original context as soon as they were narrated. In other words, the stories were produced for the sake of translation and do not have an original written text or a "supposed" original (Moroccan) audience because they were not produced for the Moroccan reader. This is what distinguishes the case of these translations from other "ordinary" cases of translated texts that have a source reader of the first text and a second or a target reader of the translated text. So, even though the Tangerian oral narratives emerged within the particular social context of post/colonial Tangier, they were meant to circulate outside Morocco—outside their context of production-- and so they were certainly read and interpreted according to the reality of the "Other".

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