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**Poetry Translating: Gains Are more than Losses**  
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**POETRY TRANSLATING:  
GAINS ARE MORE THAN LOSSES**

**Inam Najm Jaber<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract**

Despite its volume and its vital importance for different nations with different cultures in the world, poetry, including song texts, already translated is only 0.5 of the percentage of literature already translated which by itself is very low (%5) (Newmark, 2004). This is due to more than one reason particularly the nature of literature in general and poetry in particular. Thus, not any translator can translate poetry. A poetry translator is required to be not only knowledgeable enough but also as creative as the poet him/ herself. The aim of this paper is to prove that poets-translators are at the top of the list of those who produced successful translations of poetry. The researcher, thus, supported her argument through a selection of experiences by a number of successful poet-translators. Much of the discussions by theorists and translators have been governed by a possible loss in translating poetry overlooking the gains which are in the interest of poets. If the poem was not translated, it would stay where it is to die in the end. Described by Gentzler (2005) as highly subjective and ad hoc, the activity of translating poetry is not expected to obey formal rules that linguists try to work out. The alternative comes from Barnstone (1999) "There are no fast rules; the translator has to feel it."

**Key words:** poets-translators, loss, gains.

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### **Introduction**

Translating poetry from a source language to a target language has been and still is highly controversial at both theoretical and pragmatic level. This is particularly due to the fact the poetry is contained in a certain form which has its own content. And as is the case with other genres of literary texts the poetic text is not in a void, but it has history and a culture.

Comparing the literary translation to non-literary translation, Newmark wrote in the *Journal of Specialized Translation* (2004:4) arguing that “Translation in literary texts is concerned with the allegorical truth, that is the fusion of imagination and ethics, and the aesthetic truth, which in a literary work is the beauty of its form and of its sound.”

For Newmark, poetry is “the hardest of all literary genres to translate” (ibid. 1). This is, because mind and imagination are involved in writing a literary text. Whereas in a non-literaturework there is the world of reality, facts and events” (ibid. 2).

Undoubtedly it is much easier to deal with reality, facts and events than with aesthetic values since the former have certain rules that could be helpful enough and lead to certain results.

Quoting Eugene Nida, Newmark (2004:1) attracted the attention to the fact that the percentage of the literature translated out of the total work translated in the world is no more than %5. And what is stunning is his guess that the translation of poetry, song texts occupies 0.5 out of the total, a figure which is contrastive to the value and importance of that translation.

### **Literary and Poetry Translation**

Writing about poetry translating would first require knowing about the text to be translated which is poetry (a literary genre) and the translator who is involved in moving the poetic text from a source language into a target language. We are talking here about two poles that are expected to be highly knowledgeable, the poet and the translator. The former who creates the text and the latter who is expected to be as recreative as possible in his translation. In a triangle of a poet, poetic text and the translator there seems a lot to be understood and explained before setting out to evaluate any poetry translation. We need first to learn about literary translation in general, have an idea about the terms: a poet, poetry, the translator and the process of translating. In the process of transferring meaning from a source language text to a target language text the translator, generally, works at two levels, the linguistic level and the extra-linguistic level- the cultural or the beyond grammar level. In translating a literary text particularly poetry the process tends to be multidimensional since the content is contained in a certain form that the translator is required to try to maintain especially in certain types of poetry other than the prose poem which also has its own constraints when translated, let alone the poetic language which is generally compact due to the prevalence of imagery.

Literary translation is believed to be the most complicated among other types of translation.

In his definition of literary translation Professor Rainer, co-founder of American Literary Translation Association (ALTA) may have clearly explained why the task of the literary translator is an intricate one,

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Literary translation bridges the delicate emotional connections between cultures and languages and furthers the understanding of human beings across national borders. In the act of literary translation the soul of another culture becomes transparent, and the translator recreates the refined sensibilities of foreign countries and their people through the linguistic, musical, rhythmic, and visual possibilities of the new language. (<http://www.utdallas.edu/alta/about/literary-translation>)

### **What is Poetry?**

The New Zealand poet and novelist C. K. Stead thinks that writing poetry is more complex than mere thinking, "I think of writing a poem as putting oneself in the moment, at the moment - an action more comprehensive, intuitive and mysterious than mere thinking ..". (<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/c-k-stead>)

The following definitions of poetry by a number of well-known poets (American, British, French and Italian) may help understand the intricate task of the translator of poetry:

The American poet Robert Frost (1847-1963) defined poetry: "Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words."

The American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) defined poetry as: "The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both."

According to poet Pau Engle (1908-1991) poetry is "Poetry is boned with ideas, nerved and blooded with emotions, all held together by the delicate, tough skin of words."

The American poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892) believes that "'To have great poets there must be great audiences too."

For the American poet Charles Simic (b. 1938) words fall short of the experience by a poet, "'Poetry is an orphan of silence. The words never quite equal the experience behind them."

The function of poetry as seen by the English poet (Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) is to unveil the hidden beauty of the world, "Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar."

Poetry, for the English poet, John Keats (1795-1821), should find its way quietly to one's soul, "'Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself, but with its subject."

The English poet Samuel Talor Coleridge (1772-1834) sees poetry as inherently associated with philosophy, "No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher, for poetry is the blossom and the fragrant of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions and language."

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From the definitions above it seems that poetry is the outcome of a set of dialectical relationships in which more than one element are involved among which are emotions, philosophy, culture, history, beauty of soul, experience and passion. When translated into a target language, poetry would require the translator to be knowledgeable and creative enough to go far beyond words on their own.

In her article Branchlines Sasha Dudgale , poet and translator of poetry and editor of Modern Poetry in Translation Blog (MPT) writes about the power and nature of words in a poetic text ,

... every word, every phrase has the deepest roots, a lifetime of connections, of sounds that ripple through words, of memories and dreams. Words all words are so deeply enmeshed, so implicated, it seems a wonder that we can still use them to new effect, can still pull them off ourselves like blood-fattened leeches and throw them back into the pool. This is clearest of all in the translation of poetry because you are always cleaving to someone else's poetic line ...(2013:2-3)

The task of translating such words would certainly be not easy. To translate them two poets would be required. The poet who wrote them and a poet who knows them (a creative translator).

The translator would see and hear the original poet's own root patterns of words. The translator would see and know them because they radiate with incomprehensible energies, but they are not yours and they resist translation, as they are deeply rooted in another person with his or her memories and past..." (ibid.).

In her book *Translation* Julian House defines the main features of translation, "The basic features of translation are thus, text, equivalence and process (2011:13)." The poetic text, however, is totally different from any non-literary text. The equivalent must be rendered equally poetic due to the nature of poetry.

Poetry represents writing in its most compact, condensed and heightened form in which the language predominantly connotational rather than denotational and in which content and form are inseparably linked. (Gentzler, 2005 : 171)

The difficulty of poetry translation, says Gentzler (ibid. 172) can be attributed to the fact that the message of a poem is implicit...giving rise to different readings and multiple interpretations.

In a literary text translation is concerned with aesthetic truth which is the beauty of its form and of its sound.(Newmark: 2004).

And to know how to translate the aesthetic truth of a poem, the translator should have a "thorough stylistic analysis of the poetic text which is a prerequisite in poetry translation. (Gentzler, 2005 : 173)

The task of the poetry translator is entirely different from that of a non-literary translator. The former is highly demanding, let alone the requirements of the literary (poetry) translator are different. Some poetry translations were evaluated as unsuccessful, while others were proved to

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have been quite accurate and loyal to the original text. So what makes this or that poetry translation as successful or accurate or fidel to the text? Is it always true that poets-translators do better in translating poems than translators who are not poets? Is the poetry translator required to be equally gifted? What is the secret if any behind a valuable poetry translation?

Generally speaking, poetry-translators have produced translations which have been highly acclaimed by critics. Let's have an idea about a number of poets-translators who talk about their own experiences in translating poems so that we may find an answer or more to the questions raised above:

#### **Experience One: (from Arabic into English)of American- Palestinian poet-translator FadyJoudah<sup>1</sup>**

Part of the difficulty in poetry translating, Joudah argues, is due to the language used in poetry writing. It is a language which needs to be encoded, "In part, poetry re-presents the language of the day, which is a language in mutation, always in a code...(blog.chron.com, 2013).

For Joudah, the intrinsic part of the task of the poetry translator consists of two elements; one is living with the text and the other is loving to be lost in language, "for me, translation does not take a long time. What takes along time is living with the text. And it is not a very highly conscious process. It's almost like living in a domain of song. Part of the work of translation is just loving to be lost in language" (ibid.)

#### **Experience Two: of American Poet-Translator Richard Jeffrey Newman<sup>2</sup> (from classical Persian into English):**

Jeffrey's main problem in translating Classical Persian Poetry is how to "make poems into English from work that is steeped in a spiritual tradition that I do not believe in, specifically Sufism." (Intralingo.com: 2013) The difficulty encountered by him is not that related to the meaning of words. Rather it is of how "to make those words sing". He seems to have experienced such a difficulty in translating his most recent work " IllahiNamaNama, by Farid Al-Din Attar which is about the Sufi concept of Zuhd or asceticism, he explained to his interviewer Lisa Carter. He made it clear that in such a translation task he was required "to learn a good deal of technical information about Sufi spirituality..."

Here Newman made a special reference to the importance of knowing the culture which produced that kind of spiritual poetry. And here lies an essential part of the poetry translator's ability to re-create. "Writing the same text in two languages amounted to re-creation",<sup>3</sup> says Nobel literary laureate Gao Xingjian who translates and writes into French. When translating from one culture into another, the literary translator thinks of rendering a text which resonates with someone of that other culture. ([www.straitstimes.com](http://www.straitstimes.com), 2013)

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<sup>1</sup>An American-Palestinian physician, poet who writes poetry in English and translate poetry into his mother tongue (Arabic). He won the International Griffin Poetry Prize for his translation of "Like a straw Bird it Follows Me and other poems" by the Palestinian poet Ghassan Zaqtan, in June 2013. "It's a big win", according to J. Patrick Schneider in an interview with the poet on the Chronicle since it " puts translations on equal footing with an original work and it introduces readers of English to a poet they otherwise never would know (blog.chron.com).

<sup>2</sup> American translator from Classical Persian into English and a poet, Richard Jeffrey Newman writes about the influence of Persian poetry on lives of the Americans. He has published one volume of poetry with the title 'Silence of Men'. He also published three books of translation: 'Selections from Saadi's Gulistan', 'Selections from Saadi's Bustan' and 'The Teller of Tales: Stories from Ferdowsi's Shahnama'. He is Professor of English at Nassau Community College in Garden City, New York (Intralingo.com/ Spotlight on Literary Translation: 2013).

<sup>3</sup>Straitstimes: It is an English language daily broadsheet newspaper based in Singapore, currently owned by Singapore Press Holdings. It is the country's highest selling paper.

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How to make words sing in translating poetry was the resounding success achieved by Coleman Barks, the American poet who translated poetry by the Sufi 13<sup>th</sup> century poet, JelalulDeen Al-Rumi (known as Rumi in the United States).

### **Experience Three: Of An American Poet-Translator Coleman Barks<sup>1</sup>:**

The American Poet-translator of Jelal al-Din Rumi is believed to have been the greatest factor in the poet's popularity in the United States. Though he did not know Persian (the language in which Rumi wrote his poetry), Barks managed to produce, through interpretation, a re-creation which appealed to the spiritual sense in a large audience of Americans. He has published several volumes of Rumi's poetry since 1976, including *The Hand of Poetry*, *Five Mystic Poets of Persia* in 1993, *The Essential Rumi* in 1995 and *The Book of Love* in 2003.

But could any poet have done a translation equally successful as Barks? Is there any secret recipe for translating a thirteenth century Sufi poetry that would highly be acclaimed as that by Barks? Part of the answer to the question can be found in Washington File Special Correspondent, Steve Holgate, "This sense of curiosity and joy, a desire to experience and understand, are characteristic of both Rumi and Coleman Barks" (<http://usinfo.state.gov>, 2005 : 3)

What Barks did has to do with both the form and the spirit of the text. The original poetry of Rumi is highly structured: It is heavily Rhymed and metered. Basically, Barks did not translate from Persian. He worked on literal, academic English translation by Reynold Nicholson. His task was to set free the translated poems from their cages. "These poems need to be released from their cages," said American poet Robert Bly to Barks referring to a collection of Poems by Rumi already translated into English" (ibid. 2).

The approach adopted by Barks was that he "made a free verse version in modern English, but he stayed true to Rumi's images and spirit, "There is a musicality that is so dense-but I cannot do anything to transmit that. I listen to the pulse that comes through (the verses) and try to follow it, to get out of its way and let it sing" (ibid.).

The product is known as 'crib translation' where "It is possible for a poet who is ignorant of the source language to produce a poetic text both aesthetically and intuitively accurate." (Gentzler, 2005 : 175)

It can be argued that such a recreation must be expected from a seasoned poet, professor of Literature with a doctorate in English let alone the fact that there is more in common between Rumi and Barks as poets.

The following is a literal translation from Persian into English of one of Rumi's 700 year old poems by Reynold A. Nicholson<sup>2</sup> followed by Barks's translation into a free verse in modern English "In some instances, he will also skip or mix lines and metaphors from different poems

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<sup>1</sup> A poet and professor emeritus at the University of Georgia (UGA) in Athens, has gained world renown for his translations of Near Eastern poets, especially Jalal al-Din Rumi. He is also an accomplished poet, whose interest in Near Eastern mysticism infuses his observations of southern landscape and life. Barks has published several collections of his own poetry and numerous poetry translations, and his work has appeared in a wide array of anthologies, textbooks, and journals, including the Ann Arbor Review, Chattahoochee Review, Georgia Review, Kenyon Review, New England Review, Plainsong, Rolling Stone, and Southern Poetry Review. He was inducted into the [Georgia Writers Hall of Fame](http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/coleman-barks-b-1937) in 2009. (<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/coleman-barks-b-1937>).

<sup>2</sup>(1868 – 1945 ) was an eminent English Orientalist, scholar of both Islamic Literature and Islamic Mysticism (Wikipedia.org).

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into one 'translation' (<http://dar-al-masnavi.blogspot.com/2012/02/dar-al-masnavi-question-about.html>.)

**Reynold Nicholson' Translation (from Persian into English):**

*On the Day of Resurrection every hidden thing will be made manifest: every sinner will be ignominiously exposed by himself.*

*His hands and feet will give evidence and declare his iniquity in the presence of Him whose help is sought.*

*His hand will say, 'I have stolen such and such'; his lip will say, 'I have asked such and such questions';*

*His foot will say, 'I have gone to (enjoy) things desired'; his pudendum will say, 'I have committed fornication.'*

*His eye will say, 'I have cast amorous glances at things forbidden'; his ear will say, 'I have gathered evil words.'*

*Therefore he is a lie from head to foot, for even his own members give him the lie,*

*Just as, in (the case of) the specious prayers (performed by the ascetic), their fine appearance was proved to be false testimonio testiculi.*

*Act, then, in such wise that the action itself, without (your) tongue (uttering a word), will be (equivalent to) saying 'I testify' and (to making) the most explicit declaration,*

*So that your whole body, limb by limb, O son, will have said 'I testify' as regards both good and ill.*

*The slave's walking behind his master is a testimony (equivalent to saying), 'I am subject to authority and this man is my lord.'"*

And here is Barks' translation of the same lines:

*"On Resurrection Day your body testifies against you.*

*Your hand says, 'I stole money.'*

*Your lips, 'I said meanness.'*

*Your feet, 'I went where I shouldn't.'*

*Your genitals, 'Me Too.'*

*They will make your praying sound hypocritical*

*Let the body's doings speak openly now,*

*without your saying a word,*

*as a student's walking behind a teacher*

*says, "This one knows more clearly*

*than I the way."(Barks, 2004 : 111)*

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It can be noticed that Barks did not allow the shape to enslave him. Quoting Vasily Zhukovsky, a nineteenth century Russian author and translator of English Romantics, Lisa Rose Bradford (2013) said “The translator of prose is the slave of the author and the translator of poetry is his rival.” (World Literature Today/ (<https://www.facebook.com/worldlittoday/infoMagazine/>))

Perhaps Art Beck’s question on poetry translating would help understand the nature of the task done by Coleman Barks in translating Rumi though he does not know Persian, the source language, “Why not accept that when poems move as poems between languages they don’t/cant replicate; but rather mutate and germinate? ([www.rattle.com](http://www.rattle.com), 2012).

### **Experience Four: of American Poet-translator Lucas Klein<sup>1</sup> ( from classical and Modern Chinese into English**

In an interview with him on ‘Spotlight on Literary Translator Lucas Klein’ (<http://intralingo.com>) (2013), Klein said that when he was an undergrad, double-majoring in Literary Studies and Chinese, he decided that Literary translation had to be the hardest kind of writing and therefore the most interesting. Commenting on the process of literature translating, he said, “My logic was that you had to produce something that was almost as good as the original, but not so good that it would take the place of the original.”

Most interesting among his translation projects from Chinese into English is his translation of ‘Notes on the Mosquito: Selected Poems of Contemporary Chinese Poet Xi Chuan’ (New Directions, 2012). In the words of Klein the Chinese poet Xi Chuan is very allusive. “This meant I got to trace his references... and in translating it I had to get in touch with all sorts of matters and literary history involving China and the rest of the world.” This is because the poet “is also very internationally-minded and so his allusions are not only to Chinese history, but to interactions between China and the rest of the world.”

### **Experience Five: of American poet-translator Tony Barnstone<sup>2</sup>:**

Barnstone does not look to literary translation as “a word-for-word cribs in which syntax, grammar, and form are all maintained and thus he/she “becomes merely a facilitator who allows the original poem to speak for itself in a new language”. (Manoa literary Journal, 1999). Rather, “translators bring their linguistic patterns, cultural predispositions and aesthetic bases to the creative act, not merely holding up a mirror to something old, but giving the original text new life in a strange environment” (ibid.66).

For Barnstone, who is experienced in translating Chinese poetry, poetry translator needs to know the “poem behind the poem”, and “to know the inspiration that creates it.” (ibid.67).

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1 A writer, translator and editor. He is a graduate of Middlebury College (BA) and Yale University. He is Assistant Professor in the Department of Chinese, Translation and Linguistics at City University of Hong Kong.

2 The editor of the *Out of the Howling Storm: The New Chinese Poetry*, coeditor of *Literatures of Asia, Africa, and Latin America*, and the coeditor and translator of *The Art of Writing: Teachings of the Chinese Masters* (With Vhou Ping) and *Laughing Lost in the Mountains: Poems of Wang Wei* (with Willis Barnstone and XuHaixin). He teaches creative writing, Asian Literature and American Literature at Whittier College. His own book of poetry, ‘Impure’, was published in 1999. (Manoa literary Journal , 1999)



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How to see the poem behind the poem? Commenting on his experience of translating the Chinese poem 'River Snow' Barnstowrote, "To merely paraphrase it in translation is to ignore the poem behind the poem. The translator must discover the poem visually, conceptually, culturally and emotionally, and create a poem in English with the same mood, simplicity, silence and depth. Each word must be necessary; essential... the words of the poem should be like flowers, one by one opening, and then silently falling."

Still talking about translating the poem 'River Snow' from Chinese into English, Barnstone stated an intrinsic requirement of translating poetry; it is that of feeling it. And "there are no fast rules". "Although I felt it necessary in 'River Snow' to make an absolutely literal, word-for-word translation to get at the heart of the poem, in other cases I've translated lines in unusual ways to get at the poem behind the poem: the urgent image, the quite mood, the sound I felt resided in the Chinese poem and needed emphasis to be felt in English" (Ibid.70).

### **Experience Six: of American-Iraqi Poet-translator Haidar Al-Kabi<sup>1</sup>**

In his introduction to the book (Anthology of Iraqi Poetry) entitled 'Flowers of flame: Unheard voices of Iraq' American-Iraqi poet-translator Al-Kabi wrote, "Only those few who have tackled literary translation from Arabic into English can describe the agony, pain, and frustration associated with such an undertaking (2008:13)." He was referring to the quite demanding task of translating into English an anthology of Iraqi poets carried out by him and his two Iraqi colleagues, Assistant Professor Dr. Mohammad in Mustansiriyah University and poet-translator Najm who worked hard to first select the poems.

And in an interview with him on Hewart website (2007) Al-Kabi explained why translating was demanding and how decision making was rather tough. He said that not all poetic texts may lend themselves to translation. And the margin of loss in translating some poems may be broader than with other poems. This is why he and his colleagues decided to exclude some poems though they selected them in the first place to be in the anthology.

In a personal contact with Al-Kabi the researcher asked him about the specific constraints encountered by him and his colleagues in translating the anthology of Iraqi poetry from Arabic into English for the American readership in particular. In the document he wrote to the researcher on the subject, Al-Kabi gave two examples of the unavoidable loss in translating. The first example is related to the poem "Tomorrow the War Will Have a Picnic" by poet Abdul-Razzaq Al-Rubaiee (translated by Dr. Mohammed 16-19). The poet here alludes to 'Al-Salam Graveyard', in Nejaf in Iraq, the largest cemetery in the world. 'Al-Salam' in Arabic means 'Peace'. So burying peace in the cemetery of Al-Salam in a poem is meant to condemn, an irony which would not be grasped by the American reader, argues Al-Kabi. The following are lines from the poem:

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<sup>1</sup> He was born in Basra, Iraq in 1954. An exile from the 1991 Gulf War, he has taught Spanish and Arabic, and earned a PhD in English, from the University of Memphis. His published work in Arabic includes Qasf (translated Bombardment), published by Al-Mada (Damascus 1998) and Flowers of Flame :Unheard Voices of Iraq (in English), (Michigan UP, 2008).

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Dr. Mohammed's translation from Arabic:

*Tomorrow the war will have a picnic  
Ornament hospitals with medicines, bandages  
And sharp lancets.  
Tomorrow the war will have a picnic  
Sweep dust and weeds from graves  
Dig new ones  
As it detests the smells of rotten corpses.  
Remove mud from mud.  
Brush your teeth well so that you can be  
Seen in the darkness that'll accompany its  
pompous entourage.  
Remove transient joys from your hearts  
As it does not like bubbles or balloons.*

*Tomorrow the war will have a picnic*

.....

*We have to come out from our  
Skins and milk names to meet it  
And join its entourage heading towards  
Al-Sallam grave yard.  
Tomorrow the war will have a picnic*

غداً تخرج الحرب للنزهة  
زينوا المستشفيات بالأدوية والضمادات  
والمشارط الباشطة  
غداً تخرج الحرب للنزهة  
نظفوا القبور من الأتربة والأدغال  
واحفروا أخرى للحديقة  
إكراماً لأنفها من روائح الجيف النتنة  
نظفوا الأوحال من الأوحال  
نظفوا اسنانكم جيداً  
لكي تتضحوا أكثر  
في العتمة التي تحف بموكبها المهيب  
نظفوا قلوبكم  
من لأفراح العابرة  
لأن الحرب  
لا تحب البالونات والفقاعات الهوائية  
غداً تخرج الحرب للنزهة

علينا أن نخرج لملاقاتها  
من جلودنا وأسماننا اللبينية  
وننظم إلى موكبها السائر  
إلى مقبرة السلام  
غداً تخرج الحرب للنزهة

The second example is related to a poem by another Iraqi poet, Abdul Hassan Al-Shathir, translated by Haider Al-Kabi (29-31). It is "Brine on the Wings of Seagulls". Here the loss is caused by translating the word 'beloved' which has a spiritual connotation in the Islamic culture acquired through its use in Sufi poetry. Also the gender of 'beloved' is masculine in the source language text. Thus, argues Al-Kabi, both Mysticism and masculinity are lost.

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Here is an excerpt from Al-shathr's poem:

Al-Kabi's translation:

*When the poor Negroes lost their first battle,  
the sailors robbed me of my beloved's keepsake,  
and washed the smell of the ocean from my body;  
Suddenly I was a stranger to the sea,  
the sea a stranger to me.  
The water closed its eyes and bowed its head;  
No longer a refuge for the cast-out mariner  
On the front of my shirt,  
I wrote to my beloved all that had happened,  
and all that was still to happen,  
I wrote: "Beloved, stretch your hands— two shores of  
oleander."  
I laid my shirt on the water;  
And, stirred by the hoped-for dawn,  
I called the seagulls to carry my shirt to the beloved.  
But the seagulls passed me by  
Bearing nothing but the sea-brine to the desert.  
The water cast back my white shirt, its sleeves tied  
together.  
Who then takes the mariner's shirt to the beloved?  
Who, on this open sea, can show a cast-out mariner the  
path to land?  
Who carries the body of this murdered mariner to Basra?  
Who?  
No one but the sea.*

....

لما خسر الزنج الفقراء المعركة الأولى ،  
انتزع البحارة من جسدي أيقونة من أهواهُ  
ورائحة البحر  
.. البرية ، صرث غريباً في البحر  
والبحرُ غريباً صار ، حنى عينيه الماءَ حزيناُ ،  
مثلي كان الماء  
في البحر ، المحنة أن لا ساحل للنوتي المطرود  
فكتبتُ لمحبيبي في صدر قميصي ما قد كان وما  
سيكون  
وكتبتُ : يا محبيبي .. اطرحُ كفيك سواحل من  
دقلى  
علقتُ قميصي فوق الماء  
ودعوت طيورَ النورس مأخوذاً بمجىء الفجر ،  
لتحمل  
للمحبيب ...  
... قميصي ، مرت حاملاً أسباخ البحر إلى  
الصحراء  
الماء يعيد إلى كنفِي قميصي مكتوفاً ، أبيض  
من يحمل للمحبيب قميصَ النوتي ؟  
من يمنح في هذا البحر الممتد لهذا النوتي  
المطرود طريقاً  
للبر ؟  
من يحمل جثة هذا النوتي المقتول إلى البصرة ؟  
من - لا غير البحر ... !

## Poetry Translating: Gains Are more than Losses, Inam Najm Jaber

Beloved....

But love had died inside the mariner,  
All lovely women had boarded ships, eloped with the  
sailors.  
And the negroes were shivering sparrows seized by  
ravenous cats.

Al-Sahib was hanged with a rope of merchants' shirts  
Beloved,

If you were there, would you cry  
or rejoice at the death of this infatuated lover?

When the poor negroes launched their second battle,  
I called on my beloved—  
their plight gave me an angry voice,  
a voice discretion could not silence—:  
Beloved, as you swing here and there,  
you split my suffering soul,  
you rock my heart, like a naked lantern glowing in the  
rain.

Beloved, you must either give your allegiance  
to the poor negroes or to the merchants.

يا محبوبى ..

ويموت العاشق في جسد النوتي ، فكل المعشوقات  
هرين ..  
... مع البحارة في سفن الهند  
والزنج عسافير تتدلى راعشة فوق القطط  
الوحشيات  
والصاحب مصلوب في قمصان التجار  
يا محبوبى ، لو كنت هناك أتبكي ، أم تتشفى من ...  
... معشوق مات ؟  
لما دخل الزنج الفقراء المعركة الأخرى ،  
ناديت على محبوبى ، إذ منحنتي المحنة صوتاً  
محتجاً  
لا توقفه ...  
شارات طريق القلب :  
يا محبوبى المتأرجح بين الوصل وبين الهجر ولا  
تختار  
إني أتعذب في الما بين ، وليل البصرة ممتد كالبحر  
... ،  
... وزنج البصرة يقتتلون مع التجار ، وقلبي  
فأنوس ...  
... في حضرة عشقك مشتعل تحت الأمطار  
يا محبوبى .. إما أن تمنح عشقك للزنج الفقراء  
وإما  
للتجار

### The Nature of the poetic Text and the Task of its Translator

Apart from the interpretive approach adopted by Coleman Barks, who translated from Persian into English, and Ezra Pound who translated from Chinese into English, through a mediator, the task of the above poets-translators is based on the nature of the poetic text. Unlike other texts like legal, political, economic and other types of texts, the poetic text has its own nature. It is a text where words, unlike words in texts other than the poetic text, need to be probed into by the translator, so that he/she would know what the poet might have wanted to communicate.

“Like the notes in a score, words change their inherent power of communication as soon as they enter into relationships with other words, images, or metaphors”. (Rainer, 2008:1)

Gentzler (2005, 175-176) echoed the translators' recipe for effective re-creative translation of poetry “Translators often stress the need for a sense of affinity with the poet they are translating and Love for the poet's work together with some degree of inspiration are important factors usually missing from models and theories of poetry translation”

Quoting Octavio Paz suggestion, Gentzler wrote that neither affinity with the poet nor the love for a poet's work are sufficient, but both are indispensable.

Gentzler stressed that “perhaps it is this profound emotional involvement in translating poetry that motivates translators almost to the point of addiction to engage in what some have termed ‘the art of the impossible’ (ibid.).

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In his lecture ‘Poetry Translating Between Fidelity to the Text and the Vision of the Translator’ given by him at the Iraqi Cultural Centre ,Kadhim (2014) made some worth noting remarks about the nature of translating poetry and the job of its translator.

Kadhim’s lecture is based on his experience in translating two volumes of poetry by two Iraqi poets (Adnan Al Sayegh and Fawzi Kareem): ‘The Bombs Have not Breakfasted Yet’ by Al Sayegh and ‘Continents of Epidemics’ by Fawzi Kareem.

Kadhim , a translator, academician and a researcher on Foreign policies at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, admitted translating especially translating poetry is an enjoyable task though it is quite demanding and involves difficult decisions to make.

To stay fidel to the original poetic text, Kadhim is not of the idea of departing too far from the text to recreate a totally different poem. His advice to the poetry translator is that it is necessary for him/her to get the translation reviewed by a native speaker of the target language (a critic or expert). Kadhim’s translation of Adnan Al-Sayegh’s volume has been reviewed by David Sullivan. The following is an example of Kadhim’s translation of Al-Sayegh’s poem شهداء الانتفاضة (The Martyrs of the Uprising):

Kadhim’s translation:

#### ***Martyrs of the Uprising***

*Those who fell in heaps  
before the tanks of the Republican Guard,  
those who dreamed about the land  
before they flew on white wings,  
those, on whose graves cacti grow,  
news of them erodes  
little by little...  
in the crowded city  
they stare with perplexed eyes  
at our ability to forget so fast.*

شهداء الانتفاضة  
هؤلاء الذين  
تساقطوا اكداسا امام دبابات الحرس  
هؤلاء الذين حلموا كثيرا بالأرض  
قبل ان يحلقوا بأجنحتهم البيضاء  
هؤلاء الذين نما على شواهد قبورهم صبير النسيان  
هؤلاء الذين تأكلت اخبارهم  
شينا ، قشينا..  
في زحمة المدينة  
انهم يتطلعون بعيون مشدوهة  
الى قدرتنا على نسيانهم بهذه السرعة.....

Despite the vital role of translation in enhancing the power of poetry in the world there tends to be some paradoxes in arguing about poetry translation by poets, poets-translators and literary critics. Weinberger<sup>1</sup>, for instance, does not believe that there is something which may stand as untranslatable, “Everything can be translated. That which is ‘untranslatable’ hasn’t yet found its translator” (ibid.).

Some poets like the American-Iraqi- poet-translator, Al-Kabi, examine in advance the degree of the possible loss in translating a certain poem. If the loss is rather unacceptable, the poem would be better not translated. So it’s a matter of an early decision making.

However, perhaps such a loss can be avoided by supporting poetry translation with some explanations in the form of footnotes no matter how extended they might be. Nabokov is a strong exponent of this argument, “I want translation with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity (Nabokov , 1955: 512).

<sup>1</sup> He is a contemporary American writer, essayist, editor and translator. His works regularly appears in translation and has been published in some thirty languages. Weinberger’s first gained recognition for his translations of the Nobel Prize-winning writer and poet, Octavio Paz. (Wikipedia.org).

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### **Some Arguments about Poetry Translation Attested.**

The writer of this research has been intermittently writing prose poetry for more than thirty years now. The first experience was early in the 1980s and it was in English. Writing prose poems in Arabic then started coming up. There have also been some experiences in self-translating from Arabic into English. Publishing some of these experiences started only a couple of years ago, not as hard copies but electronically (on Face book).

The researcher's two major poetry translating projects are two volumes of poetry (in Arabic) by the well-known Iraqi poet and Writer Abdul-Zehra Zeki. One was translated into English by herin 2012 *The Tugraa of Light and Water*. The Arabic version was published in2009. And the second *Romance* was translated by herin 2013. Both the Arabic and English versions of *Romance* are still waiting to be published.

Based on the researcher's actual experiences in poetry translating, she claims she can attest some arguments about the much discussed issue of poetry translating already mentioned in this paper.

Zeki's 'Abbaside Day' is one of his poems in his volume of poetry, *The Tugraa of Light and Water*. It is immersed in the luxurious life of a Day in the Abbasid era in Baghdad. Against such a background, the translator is expected to have been aware of the particulars of the highly cultured environment of the Abbasid time. The longest poem in the volume, 'Abbasid Day' is packed with images reminiscent of supposedly Baghdad as the capital of culture, education, philosophy and centre of papermaking. 'Abbasid Day' is not a usual romantic poem. Rather it is an example of poetry planted in an environment related to a certain type of life in history to which the poet belongs, a history marked with a highly sophisticated culture and civilization.

The researcher's translation of *Abbasid Day* *نهار عباسي* (an excerpt)

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From your blue ring  
Breaks a day of an oriental winter  
That is your white finger

The night is a blue carnelian stone  
From Bukhara  
And the ring is dissolved in the whiteness

Whoever looks at your ring  
Should go to the market  
Shake the last drop of light off its stone  
Onto the bench of mu'tazilipapermaker  
And the light would emanate from the shelves  
Silent  
Bright  
That keeps a night vigil in prayer  
As the Mu'tazilil would go on  
(Distracted from the ring, the stone and their  
light)

Decoding the riddles of the manuscript  
Of an unknown Greek Stoic  
Now that has disentangled  
Amongst the ink of his letters  
A drop of light  
From the stone of a blue carnelian  
\*\*\*

And in the upper refinement of your mirror  
A drop of tear has mixed with a pine cone  
While on the wall which was invisible  
There was a lamp emitting light  
With its silent flame, staring  
At this strange blend

\*\*\*  
A thread comes out  
From the musk censer  
By your bed.

يطلع من خاتمك الأزرق  
نهاراً شتاءً مشرقياً.  
ذلك هو أصبعك البيضاء  
الليل  
فصٌ عقيقٍ أزرق  
من بخاري  
والخاتمُ دائبٌ في البياض  
من الذي يبصرُ  
خاتمك يسعى في السوق..  
وينفضُ عن فصّه آخرَ قطرةٍ ضوءٍ  
على دكةٍ وراقمعتزلي،  
فيضوع الضوء من الرفوفِ  
صامتاً  
شعشاعاً  
يتهدّد  
بينما المعتزلي يواصلُ (منشغلاً)  
عن الخاتم والقص  
وضوءيهما)  
فكّطلاسم مخطوط  
لرواقئٍ إغريقيٍّ مجهولٍ،  
وقد انحلت  
ما بين مداد حروفه  
قطرة الضوء  
من فصّ العقيق الأزرق.  
\*\*\*

وفي الصفاء العالي لمراتك  
امتزجت  
قطرة من دمع بحية أرز.  
فيما على الجدار الذي لا يرى  
كان قنديلٌ يضيء،  
ويحدقُ لهبهُ الصموت  
في هذا الامتزاج الغريب.  
\*\*\*

يطلع خيطٌ  
من مبخرة المسك  
جنب سريرك

The translator from the very beginning is faced with not an easy decision to make. The first word (ظغراء) in the title of the poem 'ظغراء النور والماء' would stop the translator to ponder. Shall it be literally translated as a 'seal' (its equivalent in English) or should it be translated as associated to the surrounding words as it occurred in an environment with certain cultural and historical nature? If the word, ظغراء, was translated as 'seal', it would be disassociated from the other two words, 'النور' and 'الماء' which will certainly be misunderstood for the target text receiver since

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there is no seal made of water and light. It is the connotative meaning not the denotative one that poet means to communicate.

Apparently highly impressed by the beauty of his beloved, the poet opted to imagine her living in a place and time exuberantly associated with the highest degree of luxury and niceties: It is that of the Abbasid days in Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid Empire. The underlined words in the poem in both the original (in Arabic) and the translated version are signals of the connotative meaning.

In the meanwhile the underlined words in the texts above are icons of the poet's culture and history to which he belongs. When translated into a target language, the receptor would certainly feel nowhere unless the translated text is provided with some explanatory note about the environment of the original poem. It would be difficult for the target text reader to enjoy the poem without first understanding the link between icons like 'Mu'tazili paper maker', 'Greek stoic' and 'Musk censor'. Such an explanation is a must in this case even though the text is poetic. Otherwise the poem will travel to nowhere and stays where it is to die in the end, "... The poem dies when it has no place to go" (Weinberger, 1988:10).

### **Conclusions**

It can be argued that in spite of all what has so far been said about poetry translating by practical translators, linguists, poet-translators and poets, the process of translating poetry remains a kind of defying the possibility of setting certain rules that can be followed in poetry translating. As a matter of fact, translators do not see any validity in setting formal rules by linguists to be followed in translating poetry, "There is, in fact, a noticeable reticence on the part of practicing translators towards attempts by linguists to provide a formal basis for what has traditionally been considered a highly subjective and ad hoc activity" (Gentzler, 2005 : 172).

The subjectivity of the activity of poetry translating which is also an ad hoc process may clearly have been reflected upon by W.S.Merwin (1989: 139). Quoting Merwin, Gentzler, wrote, "I continue in the belief, you know, that I don't know how to translate, and that nobody does. It is impossible but a necessary process, there is no perfect way to do it and much of it must be found for each particular poem as we go."

Although he sees translating poetry as the impossible art, Merwin does not hesitate to go on defying such impossibility since it continues to tempt him to go on taking up the challenge... "Yet the impossibility of the whole enterprise is part of the perennial temptation to try again". (Winkler, 2012)

There might be some loss in translating poetry but in the meanwhile, it can be concluded, that the gains are much more especially when translation helps give life to a poem by making it fly as far as possible to be read by as many people as possible. Therefore, translating poetry is in the interest of the poet and his/her poems.

In the Annual George Steiner Lecture (2014) *Translation as a Shaping Force in Literature* by Susan Bassnett at Queen Mary University of London the gains to writers through translation were proved to be big, "Despite the discourse of loss that has bedeviled so much discussion of translation in literary studies, this lecture proposed an alternative view which is that the gains to writers through translations have been of huge significance."



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