Mobility, Migration and Translation During the Algerian Black Decade: From Tragedy to Identity (re)Construction

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The Cultural approach is at the core of the modern theory of translation. The latter includes travel narratives, migrant writing, identity issues as well as cultural performances and representations. Henceforth, the beginning of the 21st century has been characterized by the emergence of a wave of research in the area of translation and migration which has matured into a more developed and autonomous field of study whose heroes are migrants who have been portrayed by Salman Rushdie (1983) as “translated being”. The present research traces back the Algerian Black decade, which profoundly weighted on Algeria. What is highlighted is far from what is jointly heard during civil wars and conflict periods associated to scenes of terrorism, massacres and persecution; light is rather shed on some achievements that resulted from the different aspects of movement. The main question of our research turns around the way mobility of the Algerian elite during the Black Decade contributed in one way or another to enhance translation and literature and then to promote identity and local cultures. Drawing heavily on the modern Algerian history located undoubtedly in crucial moments, the study aims at investigating how movement during the tragic events of the Black Decade refreshed translation and migrant writing. The research provides a comprehensive picture of historical trends by available existing data, making it a descriptive research since this latter tries to answer questions about the complex nature of transnational features of translation with the purpose of understanding the phenomenon under scrutiny from precise angles. The study, which scrutinized Assia Djebar’s novel Far from Medina (1991) revealed the significant contribution of elite migrants’ mobility during the Algerian Black in enhancing translation and literature within and across national boundaries.

Keywords: translation, migration, movement, the Algerian Black Decade, identity

Introduction

Translation and language played a major role in broadcasting the multimedia responses to the chaotic events which characterized the political landscape of Algeria at the dawn of 1990 to the beginning of the new century. The Algerian Black decade had captured the audience across the world, consequently a large volume of articles and books have been written about these tragic events, however, there was an aspect which received no attention from academics and writers, little has been produced to examine how migration movement during the intended period has shifted from a dramatic to a creative scene through the achievements of many Algerian elite migrants among them the novelist Assia Djebar.

Movement, Mobility and Migration Writing

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To move is a human act which happens spontaneously alongside the individual’s life. The movement of people has been noticed since the dawn of time thanks to the constant interaction between humans and their physical environment, this phenomenon gave rise to the various kinds of migration which become possible thanks to the land, the sea or the air movement. Equally, humans who move either by feet, by more primitive animal-drawn models, or using the most modern means of transportation, travel with their languages, their culture and their encyclopaedic knowledge from that comes the inseparable nexus between locomotion and cognition asserted by the anthropologist Ingold (2011). Being one aspect of movement, migration has mysteriously been associated to many negative connotations such as dispersion, uprooted, diaspora, unsettled, even though a new perception of the notion of migration start to gain ground, realizing that behind any diaspora, there is a tremendous potential of knowledge and a unique know-how that could not be revealed in migrants’ home countries for multiple reasons. The new paradigm of the drain brain, for instance, doesn’t stand for one of the impoverishing factors, but a real source of its multi-layered revival on an international scale.

With this in mind, it is worth noting that the definition of mobility is flexible, it is inherent to the personal experience of each individual subject of migration. What could be somehow easily achieved by a number of transnational migrant elites cannot be so to the overwhelming majority of labor social class migrants or refugees who often have very limited opportunities. This category of migrants “often suffer social and cultural isolation due to processes of racialization, ethnicization, and/or ethnocentric attitudes from individuals, communities, or entire nations” (Inghilleri, 2017, p. 2).

The elite migrants put themselves at the disposal of the marginalized category, much more than that, they bear the burden of representing their countries in best-and worst-case scenarios with their pens subscribing their performances in the scope of migrant writing. This latter is a systematic heterogeneous, ambivalent and a hybrid discourse which stands at the cross-road combining shifting identities and transnationalism in many aspects of life.

Migrant writing and migrant literature in particular seemingly emerged thanks to the contribution of the postcolonial theorists Edward Said (1935-2003) and Homi Bhabha (1949-) who shaped the migration literature principles. The emergence of migrant literature, which aims at examining various narratives of the social, cultural, economic and political aspects of the migrant’s lives in their alien conditions of the host societies, has explicitly influenced the advent of new theories of translation in the modern era which shifted from a narrower sense of translation standing for “rendering fully articulated stretches of textual material from one language into another, and encompasses various modalities such as written translation, subtitling and oral interpreting” (Baker, 2016a, p. 7) to a broader one suggesting that “translation involves the mediation of diffuse symbols, experiences, narratives and linguistics signs of varying lengths across modalities (words into image, lived experience into words), levels and varieties of language (Standard Arabic and Spoken Egyptian, for example)” (Idem).

Previous Studies

A myriad of studies have been consecrated to exhibit the connection between translation and migration. In her article “Translation, migration and communication in the Roman Empire: three aspects of movement in History” (2006) Moatti examined, through literary and documentary sources from early and late periods of the Roman Empire the concept of movement and its three crucial aspects, i.e. translation, migration and communication and how movement deeply impacted the relations between individuals and states, increases the
use of writing in society and transforms identities.

Cronin (2006) claimed in a similar context that migrants are in the dilemma of defending their local cultures or surrender to the foreign ones, i.e. to choose between two translational strategies. First, they opt for translational assimilation “where they seek to translate themselves into the dominant language of the community” (p. 50). This strategy relies on the presence of institutional structures (language classes) to have access to the host language and facilitate social and economic integration. Second, they opt for translational accommodation “where translation is used as a means of maintain their languages of origin” (Idem, p. 52). In this strategy, there is a desire to resist being translated into the target language. This necessitates the presence of quite different institutional structures within the host community, including interpreting services and a variety of source language programs.

By the same token, Polezzi (2012) mapped out the way language practices connected to migration can be linked to translation as a linguistic activity. She also discussed the language practices which emerged from migrant writing as the nexus between translation, migration and political action and how these three concepts are tightly linked to a biopolitics of language.

As for Inghilleri (2017), she examined the interwoven issues of translation and migration equally with a culture whose essence is driven from linguistic translation found naturally in the different situations of the migrant’s life where hybridity takes the lion’s share. According to her “migrants transform and are transformed by the communities and societies they become a part of, and translation is central to this process” (Inghilleri, 2017, p. 3). It seems that the designations given to both migration and translation with all their components tend to be adjusted by Inghilleri with the advent of the new technologies in the globalization era which reshaped the fundamentals of migrant writing and the issue of (re)constructing the migrant identity.

The Algerian Black Decade: A Trigger Component for a Massive Migration

The war under scrutiny has always been labelled by the western media “Civil war”. This latter stands for the armed conflict broken out between the Algerian Army and various Islamic rebel groups which began in 1991 as a consequence of the Islamist electoral victory cancellation. The war has known an extreme violence and brutality against civilians and the military as well. Islamists targeted the elite and journalists, over 70 of whom were killed. Children have been widely used by rebel groups, henceforth, various categories of people started escaping the war moving to different countries.

The movement of Algerians during the Black Decade has permitted to notice a real shift from a traditional migratory flow related to leave the home for work, studies and family grouping to political migratory flow which ranges from asylum seekers to political refugees. A daring and every so often lawful and unlawful flow of Algerians knocked the doors of the five continents. Migrants were either legal or illegal, forced or free, asylum seekers, brain drain, and an increasing feminized migration.

Algerian migrants have been attracted by various destinations due to multiple considerations. France was the favourite destination of Algerians for historical and postcolonial considerations. From 1992 to 2002, 17,172 Algerians requested asylum in France, though less than 500 were granted full refugee status1. France also introduced a secondary form of protection called “territorial asylum”, which was designed specifically for Algerians. An estimated 12,000 Algerians have applied for territorial asylum since it was officially introduced.

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1 OFPRA (Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides), unpublished data.
in 1998, but a similarly tiny percentage has been recognised (exact figures are not available).  

Many facilities considerations to emigrate to Germany and the UK have attracted both future workers and elite migrants. In the early 1990s, Germany received the overwhelming majority of refugees from the Algerian conflict. Applications in Germany peaked in 1993, when 11,262 Algerians requested asylum. Germany received the majority of asylum applications in the EU of all nationalities at this time, but even by this standard the concentration of Algerian applications is surprising. A number of well-known FIS politicians were granted asylum in Germany in 1992, and Germany quickly acquired a reputation in Algeria for granting asylum to Islamists. From 1993 onwards, the number of Algerians claiming asylum in Germany fell off very steeply, with applications averaging barely more than 2,000 a year over the next ten years.

For the United Kingdom, in 1992, no Algerians requested asylum in this country, but from 1993 onwards this began to rise slowly. By 2002 a total of 11,085 Algerians had requested asylum in the UK, the third-highest total anywhere in the world after Germany and France. This is surprising, since the movement of Algerians to the UK cannot be explained by an existing community, as in France and, to a lesser extent, Germany. The UK also granted asylum to several prominent Islamist leaders, and in the mid 1990s, it gained a reputation, similar to Germany’s, as a key centre for Islamist politics, and in some circles has been connected with terrorism. Other EU countries have periodically received significant numbers of asylum seekers from Algeria over the past decade, though none approach the total numbers received in France, Germany, and the UK. Before the current conflict, small communities of Algerians existed in Belgium and the Netherlands, and both of these countries have received a total of around 5,000 asylum applications each from the Algerians. Spain and Italy are both significant new destinations, although apart from 1998 and 1999 when Spain received over a thousand applications, they have both received only a hundred or so applications per year.

As for North America, Algerian population has been attracted by Quebec, and Canada is the only country outside of Europe recorded as receiving a significant number of Algerian refugees, a total of 5,769 in the decade from 1992 to 2002. It is obviously far more difficult to return to Algeria from North America, and research suggests that Algerians who hope to return to Algeria prefer to seek refuge in Europe. More recently Algerians have reached the USA, although the number of asylum applications, there is really not significant.

Elite Migrants: Identities Spokesmen?

From 1993 onwards, the GIA began a policy of targeting journalists, academics, artists, writers, and any other prominent intellectual figure who criticised them in any way. The International Committee of Support for Algerian Intellectuals (CISIA) was set up in Paris to provide support to people targeted in this way. By the end of the 1990s, the CISIA offered a more general support role to Algerian refugees. A whole range of smaller-scale, locally based solidarity organisations have also developed, mainly in France. Many of these have been set up, often by recently arrived Algerians, to offer assistance to newly arrived refugees. Many Algerians who have left Algeria during the conflict describe themselves as “exiles”, a term that effectively captures their feelings of distance from Algeria and simultaneous alienation from the long-established community of Algerians,

2 http://www.forcedmigration.org/research-resources/expertguides/algeria/alldocuments#section-13, retrieved on September 18th, 2018.
particularly in France. There are also solidarity organisations that campaign and collect financial or material support directly for those in Algeria; cultural associations. Many of these groups have been founded by “intellectuals” recently arrived from Algeria who have brought a new dynamism and urgency to Algerian-focused associations in France, and have spread concerns across Europe and further afield.

The Impact of Migration on Literature and Translation: Elite Migrant Writing as a Form of Translation

Far from the life of migrant women depicted in the literature featured as being women who suffer from isolation caused by language barriers which could lead to a terrible lack of job opportunities in the one hand, and this poor material living conditions, and the portrait of migrant women seeking for raising their children without any integration horizons on the other hand, another highly skilled category of migrants have engaged to live and write abroad and consequently manage multiple identities, it is about elite migrants who play a key-role in shaping societies.

It is noteworthy that the wave of movement of Algerians cited above has increased the use of writing by migrants who become agents of translation and self-translators for their multilateral diversity. Mobility of migrants has generated a movement of texts as well. The novelist Assia Djebar, who lived between Algeria, France, and the United States of America, has portrayed in her novels a remarkable trilingualism reflected in the values of transculturalism. The following lines scrutinize her novel *Loin de Médine* (1991) written during the Black Decade as an immediate answer to stand against the emergence of the fundamentalist Islamism in her home country. Assia Djebar started waging a long-term struggle whose aim was to reform Islam and mainly the distorted picture of Muslim women. In 1985, Assia Djebar began to document the historians of the first centuries of Islam, notably, Ibn Hicham, Ibn Saad and Tabari. The first was known to have edited the first biography of Prophet Muhammed. The second known to be reliable and precise. The last, a scholar whose beauty in the style of his Arabic language was dazzling.

“I called ‘a novel’ this set of stories, scenes, sometimes vision, which nourished in me the reading of some historians of the first two or three centuries of Islam (Ibn Hicham, Ibn Saad, Tabari)” (Djebar, 1991, p. 5). Assia Djebar quickly noticed some missing pieces in the writings of the most famous historians of that period, every aspect corresponding to the role of women of the first Islamic centuries was missing, in other words, it was about the history without women. The novelist stopped writing a novel entitled “*Vaste est la Prison*” to dedicate herself to a new adventure with “*Loin de Médine*” in the wake of the outbreak of violent protests intended against the maintenance of the system in Algeria in October 1988. Two years later, the Islamic fundamentalism quickly sprung up across many regions in the country, the fundamentalists didn’t only spread fear and terror among civilians, but they insisted on devaluing the real role given by Islam to women in the society by denying women’s access to equality and their rights. Assia Djebar reveals “the hidden reality” of the real status of Muslim women.

The events of the novel took place a few days before the Prophet’s death in 632 AD. At that time, the roles assigned to women were major especially with the outburst of multiple struggles after the Prophet’s exodus.

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5 Idem.
6 Fatima-Zohra Imalayen born on June 30th 1936 in Cherchel (Algeria) and died on February 6th 2015, known by her pen name Assia Djebar, was an Algerian novelist, translator and filmmaker.
7 Translated into English *Far from Medina* by Dorothy S. Blair.
8 Translated into English *So Vast the Prison*, by Betsy Wing; Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002.
from Mecca to Medina. Right after his death, a deep discord about the Caliph\footnote{A politico-religious person designated to be the successor of the Islamic prophet Muhammad.} to succeed to the prophet Muhammad has characterized the arena. Djebar gives an original version of Islam through the women’s voices revival. She recounts their experiences in the very original time of Islam being the first Islamic state founded in Arabia. Djebar gives us the opportunity to unrestrictedly imagine these traveling, rebellious, plotting and tempting women.

The text of Assia Djebar traced back the first era of Islam in a transnational travel which went therefore beyond the national, the cultural and the linguistic boundaries. By the same token, drawing from the history of Islam, which was written in Arabic, Assia Djebar put herself in the skin of a translator-adaptor. She translated, using the adaptation strategy, entire passages of Ibn Saad’s book *Tabakat el Kobra* when introducing the Caliph Abu Bakr (10th-13th AH). She was compelled to keep a number of Arabic terms related mainly to Islam whenever she related real facts, therefore, footnotes are added to suggest a deep explanation of these concepts in French, this is illustrated in the following list of Arabic words used in her text without being translated: (Abu, banu, bay’a, calife, fatiha, figh, Jahiliya, hadith, ihram, hidjra, ijtihad, imam, izar, kunya, sura, suak, minbar…etc.). The author who composed in the ex-colonial language as a form of parallel writing and assiduous rewriting, has also involved “mental translation in reverse” from French into Arabic.

The kind of translation considered as a self-translation in the literature written in a host language as in the novel under scrutiny is built on non-linear processes of translation “Many cases of self-translation, in fact do not follow the familiar binary model in which a pre-existing source text moves across linguistic and cultural frontiers in a linear fashion. Non-linear forms of translation are common in migration contexts and include all of those cases…” (Polezzi, 2012, p. 350). At this stage, it becomes more than necessary to conjure that migrant writing “requires us to engage our definitions of translation to include within it self-translation and polylingual writing” (Idem).

Writing in a foreign language what cannot be divulged in one’s mother tongue, could be driven by a feeling of a creative freedom using translation as a kind of travel holding multiple tongues and cultures and a multilingual communication at the same time. There is in migrant writing and in oneself-translation practices a kind of assimilation with some spices of “outsidedenss”. Henceforth, translation can be used to construct a cultural patrimony, a patrimony which has not been said in its original language and “here is the paradox” of translationas qualified by Moatti (2006).

**Conclusion**

Migration literature, translation and a wide range of polylingual practices are part and parcel of the process of acculturation whose main principles are a common world and culture nurtured with a human mature identity which would be able to cope with the twenty-first century most complex identity issues. The mobility of elite migrants during the Algerian Black Decade has significantly contributed in enhancing translation and literature as well as spreading and “contesting public narratives within and across national boundaries” (Baker, 2016b, pp. 4-5). Thanks to the elite migrants’ transnational experiences, more flexible identities have been reshaped. Right after her death in 2005, and as a reward for her lifetime identity-rooted writings, The Assia Djebar’s Novel Prize has seen the light. It consists of an Algerian literary prize created to promote the Algerian multilingual literary production written in Arabic, Berber and French as well as translating Assia Djebar’s
masterpieces into Arabic, knowing that curiously only few of her works have been translated into Arabic up till now.

References