

Literary Translation and Cultural Referencing : *The Blinding Absence of Light* as a Case Study

Abdelmajid Madani*, Ph.D. Candidate, Mohammed V University Rabat, Rabat, Morocco
madaniinterpretation@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of culture specific references in translating a literary work taking as a case study the novel *Cette aveuglante absence de lumière* written originally in the French language by Taher Benjelloun and translated into the English language under the title *The Blinding Absence of Light* by Linda Coverdale . The study offers insight into the distribution of these references in the novel eliciting data related to Moroccan, French, American, Oriental and other culture specific references along with their comparison. There is also room for a theoretical background regarding the procedures and strategies that have been elaborated by translation theorists to account for the translation of cultural references. My analysis focuses on the strategy adopted by the translator and procedures employed in the translation of these references into the English language. The paper ends with a discussion of the attained results taking into consideration cultural attractiveness and its impact on the perception of the characters and their future desires.

Keywords: Culture specific references, Moroccan literature, Taher Ben Jelloun, the Blinding Absence of Light, cultural translation

Introduction

Cultural translation is multifold in that it can affect the image of the source culture in a number of ways depending on the intent and agenda of the translation initiator. Thus translators find themselves performing a modulated translation in accordance with the patronage perspectives. Some researchers argue that translation has been used as a tool to confirm the cultural expectations held by another culture via the selection of a certain number of literary works rather than others (Faiq (2004)).By the same token, one can argue that cultural translation can be instrumentalized by the source culture in the process of its worldwide projection and presentation to a foreign audience to correct the already formed assumption or to evoke a certain desired effect (Ping (2014)).

Accordingly, it is of utmost importance to consider cultural specific references and their translation to see to what extent a literary work can harbor the local culture and the procedures adopted by the translator in mediating and manipulating cultural differences .A culture specific reference can be defined as an element, a concept or an item distinctive of a particular culture.Baker (1992,p.21) offers a binary categorization of culture specific concepts: concrete and abstract. An abstract reference can include the word “privacy” and the expression “ Speaker of the House of the Commons”, whereas a concrete one may comprise the phrase “airing cupboard”. In addition, Newmark (2010) divides culture specific items into six types referring to the domains of ecology, public life, social life, personal life,customs, pursuits and private passions.

Another classification is made by Díaz Cintas and Remael(2007) in which culture specific items are grouped into three categories: geographic, ethnographical and socio-political. Geographic references encompass the names of physical objects as well as flora and fauna peculiar to a particular region, ethnographic references are made up of names that designate particular objects such tools and others that refer to art, culture and measures and finally socio-

political references are related to institutions and organizations. Still Antonini and Chiaro (2005) offer ten divisions of culture specific references such as institutions, monetary systems, places, education, unit of measurement, sport, titles of books and movies, proper names, holidays and food.

A consideration of a plethora of the available literature written about the translation of culture specific references indicates that focus has been set so far on the translation techniques deployed to successfully communicate the source text to the new readership, leaving out the assessment of the cultural presence in a literary work to have an idea about cultural interferences and domination. This deficit raises three questions:

Q1. How far can an investigation of the distribution and translation of cultural specific references help in understanding the contours of cultural dissemination, interference and stereotyping?

Q2. To what extent can the novel *The Blinding Absence of Light* serve projecting the Moroccan culture?

Q3. What are the procedures employed by the translator and their effects on the image of the source culture?

Thus, this paper is concerned with the translation and distribution of cultural specific references in the Moroccan context, studying the novel *The Blinding Absence of Light* written by Taher ben Jelloun and its translation. The first section deals with the relevant literature followed by the adopted methodology. Still other sections devoted to the analysis and discussion of the findings.

Review of literature

Translators deploy a set of techniques in their manipulation of culture specific references. Davies (2002) highlights that some authors tend to avoid the use of opaque and inaccessible expressions in their writings for the sake of translation, depending on the position of the author and his/her reception and palatability in the target culture. To successfully render culture specific items, Davies (2002, p. 66) contends that a translator has to evaluate the status, “needs and capacities of the target audience just as the original author did for the audience of the source text” along with their familiarity with the source culture and tolerance of unfamiliar expressions. The translator, then, should assess the relevance of these references in each context as sometimes the presence of foreign items is overarching, whereas in other contexts an explanation is necessary to mediate the meaning of the ST. In cases where these items are judged unnecessary, translators adopt a universally intelligible variety of the target language or opt for local culture references.

The latter strategy is based on the principle of equivalent effect introduced by Eugene Nida (Hatim and Munday (2004)) positing on the assumption that cultures express the same thought in different forms. Thus the translator tailors the translation according to the relationship that exists between the original reader and the message, resulting in a natural version of the translation that preserves the spirit of the original text. Indeed Nida (Hatim and Munday (2004)) distinguishes between two types of equivalence: formal and dynamic. Formal equivalence is based on the preservation of the form according to the context of use, whereas focus in dynamic equivalence is set on the message when the form does not affect the transfer of the meaning.

In her discussion of the manipulation of culture specific references, Davies (2002) illustrates five options literary translators have: (1) replacement of the items with others with more general term, (2) replacement of the items with others specific to the target language, (3) preservation of the original items without adaptation, (4) preservation of the items with the incorporation of explanations such as a gloss, footnote or a comment and (5) the omission of the items. In addition, Guerra (2012) considers fifteen procedures translators resort to in rendering

STelements:(1)adaptation,(2)borrowing,(3)calque,(4)compensation,(5)compression/reduction/condensation/ommission(6)description,(7)equivalence,(8)explication/expansion/amplification/diffusion,(9)generalization,(10)literaltranslation,(11)modulation,(12)particularization,(13)substitution(linguistic-paralinguistic),(14)transposition and(15) variation as explained:

Table 1.

Procedure	Explanation
Adaptation	The replacement of the cultural element with another in the target culture (TC), especially in situations like advertising and children's stories to have the same effect of the original text in the source culture (SC).
Borrowing	Taking a word or expression without translation in the absence of their equivalents in TC or for stylistic and exotic purposes. There are two types of borrowing naturalized and pure depending on the degree of modification.
Calque	Literal lexical and structural translation of a foreign word or expression.
Compensation	The balance of the semantic loss in translation in terms of the content and stylistic effect of the ST.
Compression/reduction/condensation/omission	The synthesis or deletion of a SC element based on the degree of relevance.
Description	A description of the form or the function of a SC element taking the form of a paraphrase, amplification or explanation.
Equivalence	The use of different stylistic or structural method to describe the same ST situation in cases of idioms and formulaic expressions.
Explication/expansion/amplification/diffusion	Rendering what is implicit explicit.
Generalization	The use of a general or neutral word or expressions for the sake of aesthetics, ambiguity and redundancy.
Literal translation	Word – for-word translation.
Modulation	The use of a different phrase to express the

	same idea involving a change of perspective, category, focus or point of view.
Particularization	The use of hyponyms or precise form to disambiguate an expression.
Substitution(Linguistic-Paralinguistic)	The replacement of linguistic elements with others which are para-linguistic or vice versa.
Transposition	The change of the grammatical category or exchange of the position of a ST elements
Variation	The change of the elements affecting the aspects of linguistic variation such as tone, style and dialect.

As expounded by Baker (1992,p. 21-27), translation problems arise also from the lack of lexicalization of SC concepts in the TC , indicating that the words “savory”, “standard” and “landslide” lack equivalence in other languages. By the same token, we can speak of scientific terminology many languages lack. In addition, semantic complexity of SL vocabulary can challenge translators. Baker (1992,p. 22) suggests that the word “arruação” is semantically complex.

“ An example of such a semantically complex word is “arruação”, a Brazilian word which means ‘clearing the ground under coffee trees or rubbish and piling it in the middle of the row in order to aid in the recovery of beans dropped during harvesting’ ”

Difficulties result as well from differences at the level of semantic distinctions of individual words in the two languages. Baker (1992,p. 22) states that in the Indonesian language there are semantic nuances related to going out during the rain in which both the words “kehujannan” and “hujanhujan” as the first word denotes “going out in the rain without knowledge it is raining”, whereas the second is used to account for the situation where going out in the rain is associated with the knowledge of the fall of rain. In this way, the Arabic language has certain linguistic distinctions related to the actions and names of animals such as camel, lion and horse as well as objects, especially the sword. Likewise, the Eskimo language has a rich repertoire of vocabulary related to snow that is translated in one or a few words in other languages. Other difficulties result either from the lack of a superordinate or hyponym. In other words, many languages have either general or specific words that do not exist in others; for instance, the Russian language does not have any general word that is equivalent to the English word “facilities”, whereas some English words like “bungalow”, “vault”, “spring”, “croft” and “mansion” do not have equivalents in many languages(Baker 1992,p.22-23).

Translation is also constrained by differences that occur at the level of the physical and interpersonal perspective in that the Japanese language is conceived to have “six equivalents for the word “give” by virtue of the action doer (Baker 1992,p.23). Other translation obstacles may

spring up from expressive meaning of some words due to the cultural load as the case with the word “homosexuality” which is translated into Arabic as “shudud al-jinsi” instead of “mitliya”. “shudud al jinsi ” means one is sexually pervert, whereas as “mitliya” is a neutral translation (Baker 1992, p.24). What is more, formal dissimilarity at the level of affixation strains the translation process in the absence of symmetry and equivalence. To overcome this constraint, Baker (1992) suggests that translators should comprehend the function of affixes within particular contexts, namely when they are used to coin a new word. The translator should also pay attention to the frequency of certain words and expressions in the source culture as well as the use of loan words and their prestige value in adding sophistication to particular texts and contexts. Baker (1992) illustrates also that sometimes translators fail to render collocations and idioms properly when they do not find any equivalent in the TT as many languages do not accept literal translation or in the case of misinterpretation. The translator then has to opt for a natural equivalent with due focus on accuracy, especially when this expression is marked in the ST or culture-bound.

Methodology

The approach the researcher conceives of is based on the analysis of the Moroccan novel *Cette Aveuglante Absence de la Lumière*, written by Taher Benjelloun and its English translation by Linda Coverdale under the title *The Blinding Absence of Light*. Data is extracted from both ST and TT to be classified, analyzed and commented by reference to textual cultural presence and the cultural specific references based on Antonini and Chiara (2005) taxonomy of cultural specific references as suggested below in the following table.

Table 2.

Cultural specific references
Proper names
Places
Languages
Clothes
Institutions
Poets
Slogans
Religion
Expression

Focus will be set on the prevalence of Moroccan, French, American and other cultural references in an effort to assess the position of Moroccan cultural references in the text under

study and its comparison to the rest of other cultural references found in the text. The analysis section involves as well a survey of the translation procedures adopted by the translator to transmit these references to the target audience as illustrated in the following tables:

Table 3. A. Moroccan references

Type	French Version	English Version	Procedures
Food	Tajine	Tajine	Borrowing
	Couscous	Couscous	Borrowing
	Tanjiya marrakchie	Tanjiya marrakchie	Borrowing
Custom	Tata	Tata	Borrowing

Table 4. B. French references

Type	French Version	English Version	Procedures
Poets	Paul Eluard	Paul Eluard	Borrowing
	Victor Hugo, Camus, Balzac, Jean-Paul Sartre et Simone de Beauvoir	Victor Hugo, Camus, Balzac, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir	Borrowing

Table 5. C. Oriental references

Type	French Version	English Version	Procedures
Poet	Ahmad Chawqi	Ahmad Chawqi	Borrowing
Writers	Najib Mahfoud	Najib Mahfoud	Borrowing
Books	Les Mille et Une Nuit	Thousand and One Nights Arabian Nights	Literal Translation Modulation

Table 6. D. American references

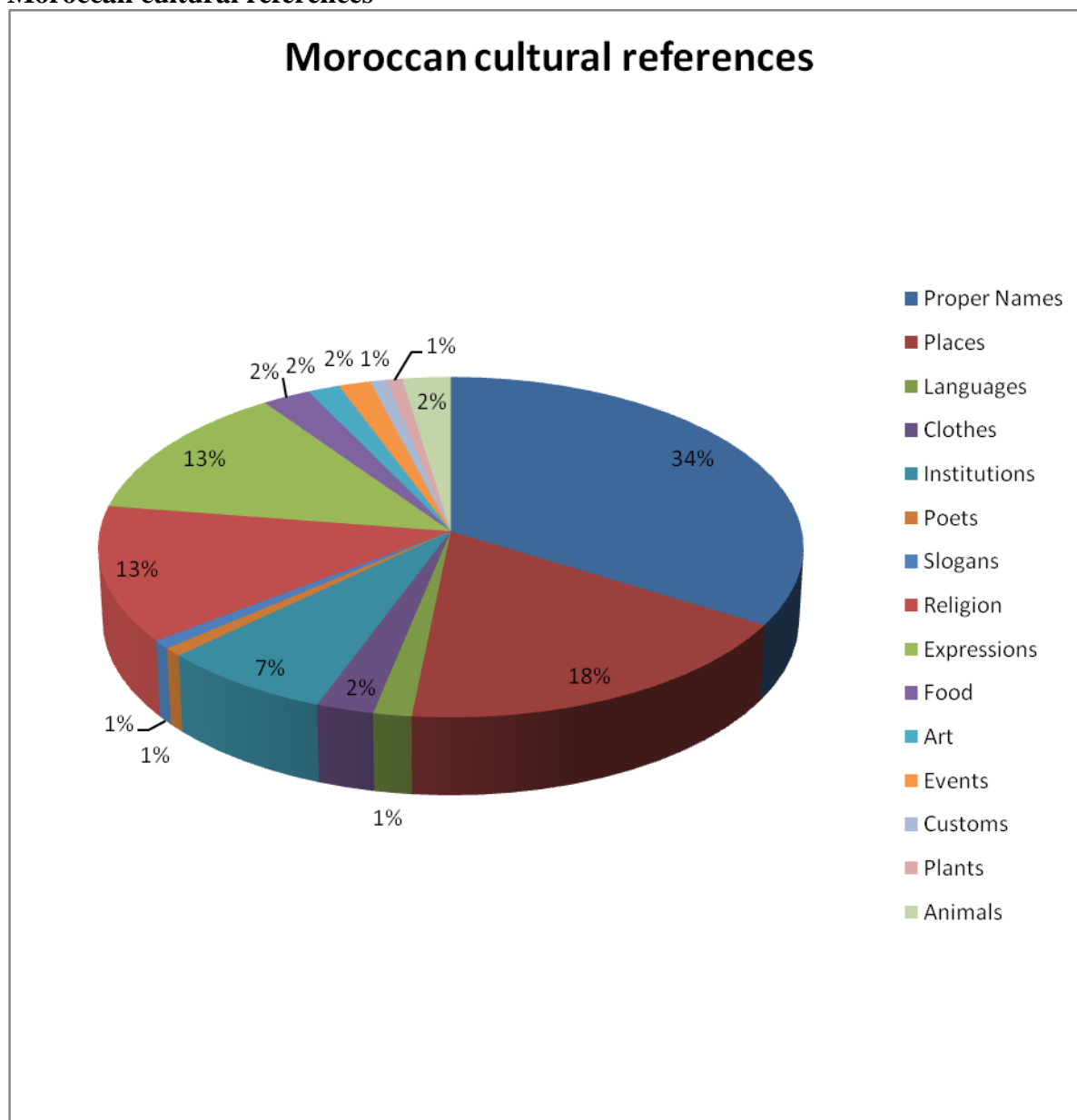
Type	French Version	English Version	Procedures
Movie Titles(2)	Tramway nommé Désir	Tramway Named Desire	Literal translation
	Ange exterminateur	The Extermination Angel	Literal translation
Dramatists (1)	Tennessee Williams	Tennessee Williams	Borrowing

Results

An investigation of the distribution of culture specific references shows that there are nearly more than 170 examples related to different domains such as ecology, public life, religion, passions, literature, titles and others as shown in the following table and figures:

Table 6

Culture specific References	Number
Moroccan	122
French	16
American	11
Orient	11
Others	7

A. Moroccan cultural references**Figure 1.** *The distribution of Moroccan cultural reference in the novel*

B. French cultural references

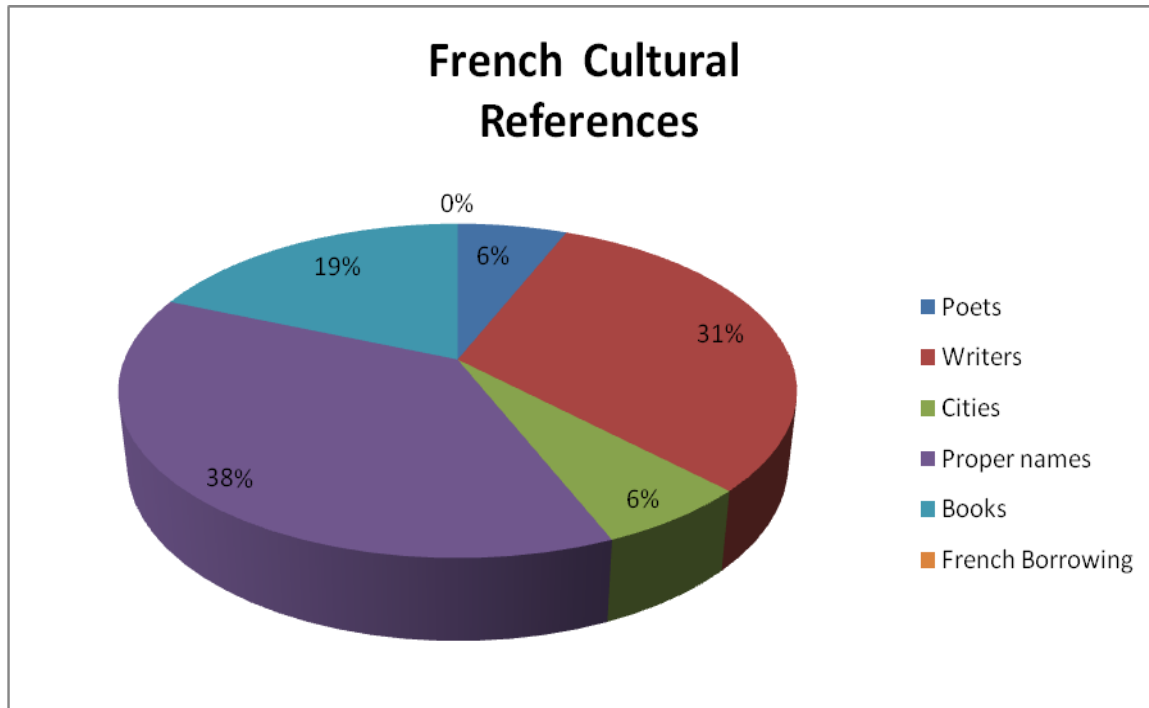


Figure 2. *The distribution of French cultural reference in the novel*

C. American references

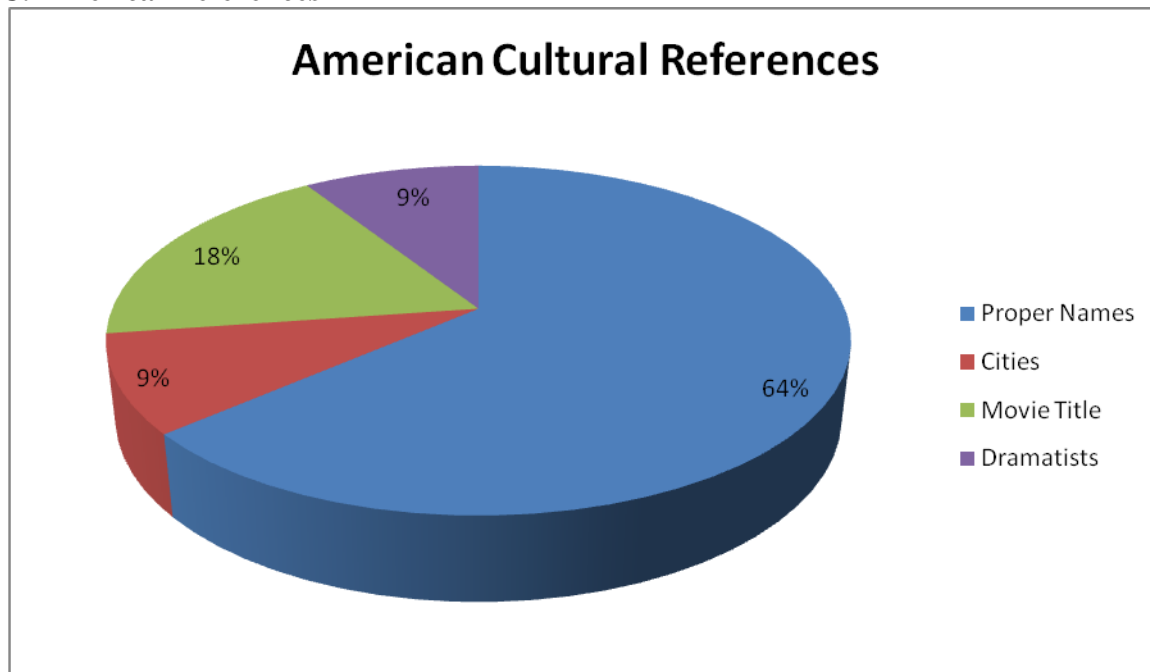


Figure 3. *The distribution of American cultural references in the novel*

D. Oriental references

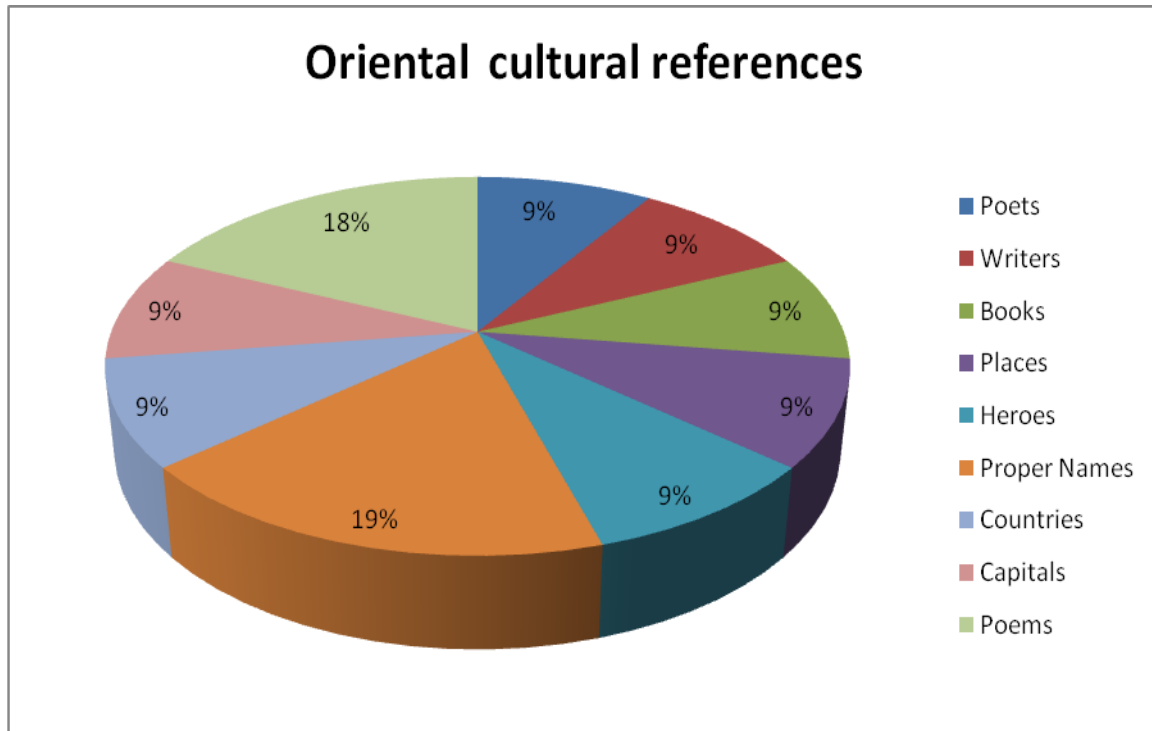


Figure 4. *The distribution of Oriental cultural reference in the novel*

E. Other cultural references

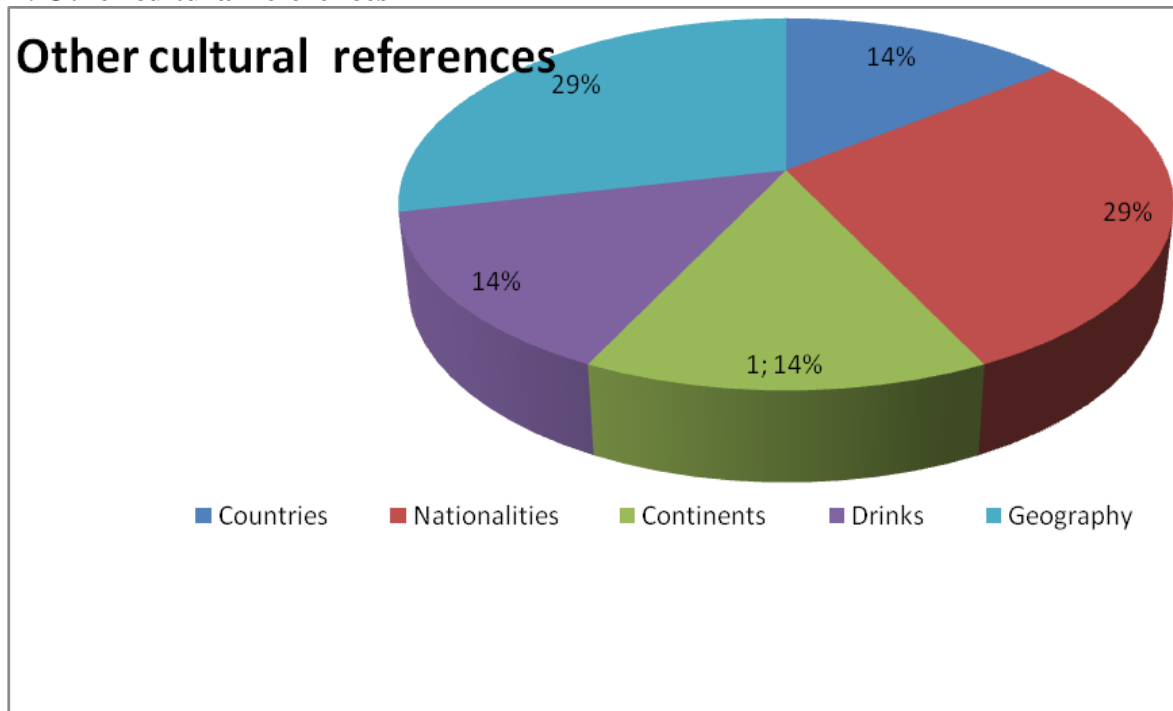


Figure 5. *The distribution of other cultural references in the novel*

F. Cultural presence in the novel

Based on the above statistics, we can have the following results:

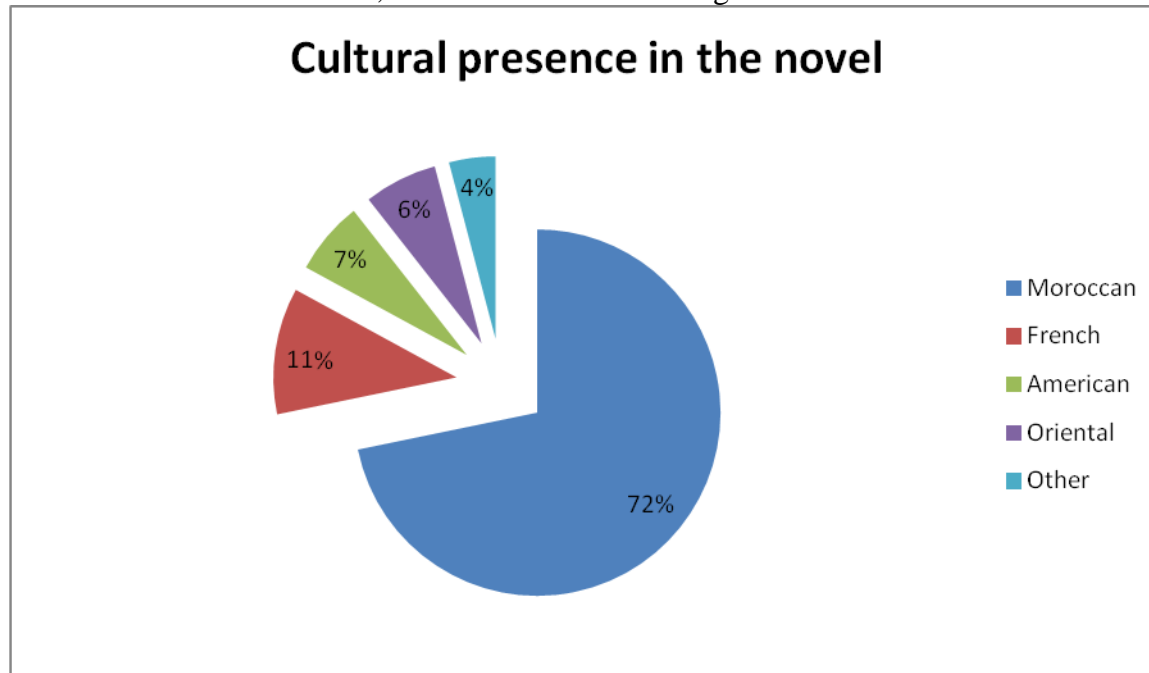


Figure 6. Cultural presence in the novel

G. High culture presence

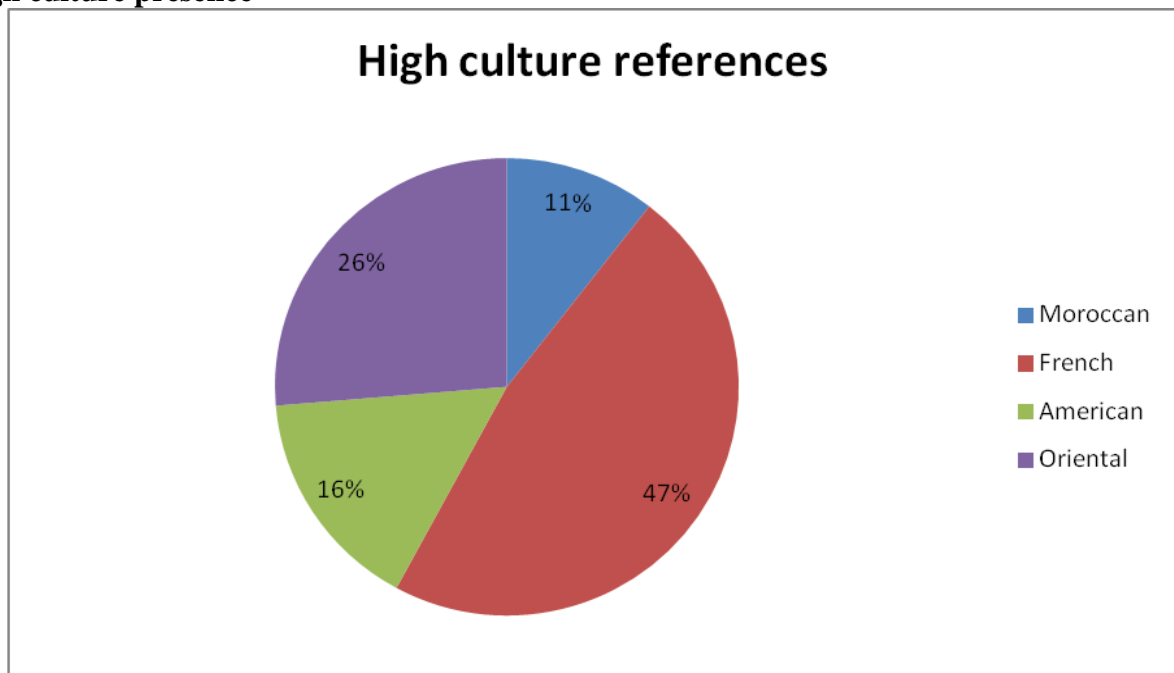


Figure 7. High culture presence in the novel

H. Translation procedures

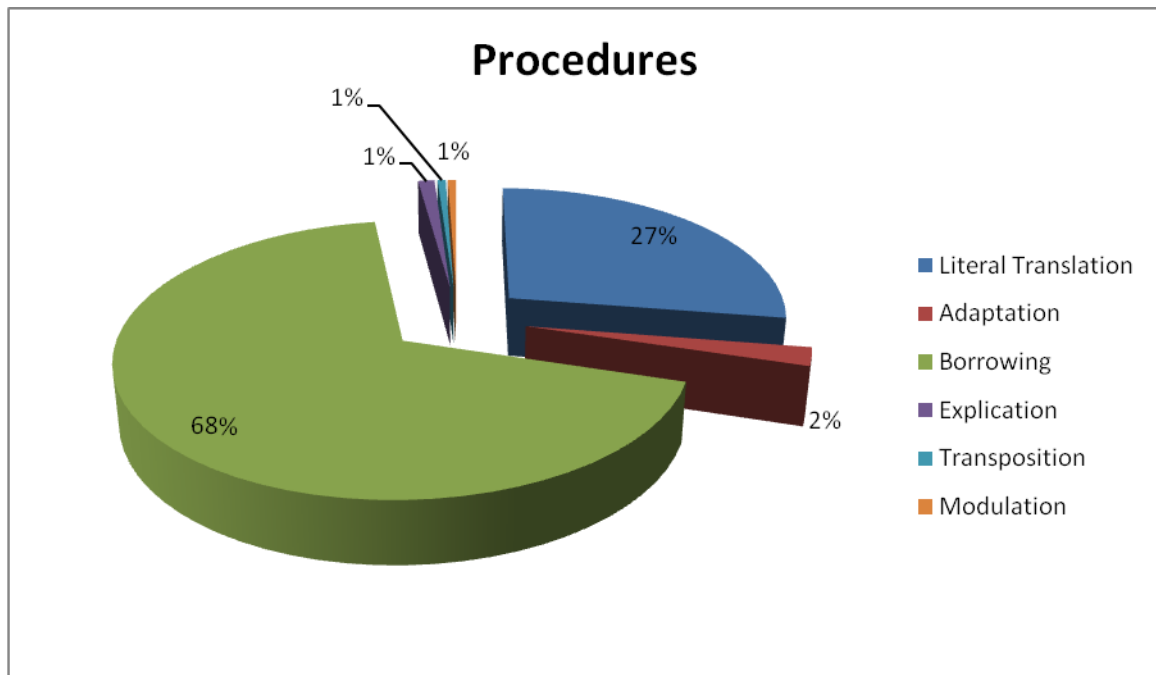


Figure 8. Translation procedures

Discussion

In discussing the results of this study, we notice that Moroccan culture specific references form the bulk part of all the references in terms of quantity and types as we trace the distribution of fifteen types consisting 72% of the total of all the references under study followed by Oriental specific references which comprise nine types surpassing French ones with three different types. In terms of quantity, French culture specific references are present in the text by 11% unlike Oriental ones which form only 6% preceded by those related to American culture consisting 7%. As of the distribution of the later in the text, American culture references are classified in the fourth position involving four types. Indeed there are also some other references present in novel touching on the names of countries, nationalities, drinks and geographic locations.

What characterizes both French, Oriental and American references is the presence of high culture as of writers, poets and cinema. Thus we can trace a number of authors and literary quotations and movie scenes in the novel as the case of the poet Paul Eluard' verses:

*‘‘Aujourd’hui lumière unique
Aujourd’hui (...la vie ... non) l’enfance entière
Changent la vie en lumière
Sans passe sans lendemain
Aujourd’hui rêve de nuit
Au grand jour tout se (...Délie...non) délivre
Aujourd’hui je suis toujours’’
Page97*

Based on figures 1,2,3 and 4, we remark that the presence of Moroccan high culture is limited to only one poet, Ben Brahim despite the fact that Moroccan references permeate the

whole novel. The figures illustrate also that the majority of Moroccan references are dominated by proper names and others related to the domain of religion.

To divulge the meanings of some Moroccan culture specific references, the translator appended his translation with a glossary explaining some of the words unfamiliar to the English reader. What is striking in these definitions is that they are misrepresentatives of the actual situation in Morocco as the case of Moussem d'Imelchil. The translator defines the latter as **“a gathering at which men buy peasant girls, some of them as young as twelve, as brides.”** The definition evokes a primitive society where there is no respect for women, whereas the festival is an annual event in which the newly-wed celebrate their marriages collectively in a period of three days starting from 23rd September. The festival is believed to be based on a love story between two lovers, Hada and Moha, from two different tribes, who fled to the mountain to curse their misfortune. The myth says that two lakes were formed out of the tears of the lovers known currently as “Isli” and “Tislit”, which mean “the husband” and “the wife” which thousands of visits take place during the season of engagement (Asharf: 2010). The translator definition presents Moroccan girls as victims of patriarchal rules evoking Mohja Kahf (2009:30-4) argument that the representation of “Arab” women in US is constrained by the receptive environment.

The researcher notices also that the translator included the word “Tamazight” in her glossary thought she did not use it in the text. Instead of using the word “Amazigh” the translator kept the word Berber as it is in the original text. Indeed the glossary contains nineteen definitions three of which are related to Oriental and French culture.

Figure 9 reflects the domination of both French and Oriental high culture in Morocco by reference to the novel under study. These cultural influences and infatuation can be supported by the following two citations.

« Je le voyais blond, différent de moi, peut-être même européen, un homme cultivé, un professeur de lettres ou un artiste » 150/22

“I envisioned a blond, different from me, perhaps even European, an educated man, a professor of literature or an artist.”

In choosing a man for his former fiancée, Salim envisions a cultivated European man different than him serving as a perfect match, reflecting the superiority of the European man over Salim's compatriots in Salim's mindset. As of the translation, the translator resorted to literal translation in transferring illocutionary force of the source text expression.

Foreign infatuation can be epitomized in terms of the places Salim intends to visit. At the end of the novel, he promises Lhousine to go together to both Cairo and Mecca.

« Nous prendrons l'avion et nous nous arrêterons au Caire, nous irons visiter les pyramides, je t'emmènerais au café où va Naguib Mahfouz, On fera des photos avec lui, on fera ensuite le pèlerinage dans des bonnes conditions .Plus de fatigue, plus de privations. » 187/30

*“We'll take the plane and we'll stop over in Cairo, we'll go visit the pyramids, I'll take you along to the cafe where Naguib Mahfouz goes, **the Egyptian writer who won the Noble Prize**, we'll have pictures taken with him, then we'll go on the pilgrimage in style. No more exhaustion, no more hardships.”*

As mentioned, both the pyramids and Najib Mahfoud serve as motivators for visiting Egypt indicating the presence of Egyptian culture in the Moroccan scene. I notice also that the translator resorted to the procedure of explication in introducing Najib Mahfoud to the English reader.

What is more, foreign cultural presence affects readability as suggested in the following quotation.

“*Quand nous étions à Ahermoumo, je te t’observais et je remarquais qu’après chaque permission tu revenais avec des livres. Moi, je rapportais des gâteaux faits par ma mère et des jeux des cartes. Je t’enviais. Tu te souviens, un jour je t’ai demandé de me prêter un livre ; tu m’as donné à lire des poèmes. J’ai essayé de comprendre, mais j’ai renoncé. Une autre fois, tu m’as donné un roman policier. J’avais bien aimé, ça se passait en Amérique. J’aurais voulu une histoire qui passe chez nous, dans mon bled, à Rachidia.*” 102/14

“When we were in Ahermomo, I used to watch you, and I noticed that after every leave you came back with books .Me, **I brought back decks of cards**, and cakes my mother made. I envied you. You remember one day I asked to lend me a book? You gave me some poems to read. I tried to understand, but I gave up. Another time, you gave me a detective story. I liked, but it was set in America. I would have liked something that took place in our own country, in my hometown, in Rachidia.”

As of the translation, the translator forwarded the clause “I brought back decks of cards” in an effort to emphasize the idea that Salim enjoys reading, whereas Abdelkader prefers to play cards. However, Abdelkader is interested in reading about his hometown Rachidia, inviting the reader for a reconsideration of the local culture.

Nevertheless, the result mentioned in figure 8 reveals that the translator made use of borrowing as the principal procedure in conveying the majority of cultural references to the foreign reader, mainly proper names. She also translated an important amount of these words literally as they are expressed in the French language though the story takes place in Morocco and the character’s dialogues are normally conducted in both Arabic and Tamazight depending on the situation and social backgrounds.

Conclusion

The conclusion that can be drawn from the above sections is that the presence of Moroccan high culture is limited in the novel unlike that of French and the Orient based on the experience of the novel’s main character. Such an influence is reflected in the character’s outlooks and aspirations. Thus our study of culture specific references emphasizes the need to pay a special attention to Moroccan cultural substance in literature for Morocco to be more influential at the global arena and project its soft power. Indeed culture is an essential elements in wielding soft power(Nye (2004).

Regarding the strategy adopted by the translator, our analysis indicates that the translator has adopted the same strategy used by the author in presenting Moroccan culture to readers in French relying mainly on borrowing and literal translation, yet the translator included a glossary at the end of the translation to help introduce Moroccan culture specific references to readers in English, which affects ambivalently the image of the source culture calling for a thorough clarification of source culture constituents for translators to explain foreign traditions to a new audience.

References

Achraf,H.(2010)*Mawsim Alkhotba f Imelchil al-maghribia liakhlid alhob wa zzwak kola am(The season of engagement in Moroccan Imelchil to commemorate love and marriage each year)* . Alarabiya. Retrieved from <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/09/20/119808.html>

Antonini, R and Chiaro,D.(2005)The Quality of Dubbed Television Programmes in Italy: the Experimental Design of an Empirical Study. in Bondi,M. and Maxwell, N. (eds) *Cross-Cultural Encounters: Linguistic Perspectives(33-44)*. Roma: Officina Edizioni.

Baker, M. (1992) *In Other Words: A Textbook on Translation*. London and New York: Routledge.

Ben Jelloun, T.(2001) *Cette aveuglante absence de lumière*. Paris : Seuil.

Ben Jelloun, T.(2002)*This Blinding Absence of Light* .London: Penguin(Original work published in 2001).

Davies, E. E. (2002) Translation, Culture and Shifts of Audience. In *Interaction entre culture et traduction*(61-74). Tangier: Altpress.

Díaz Cintas, J. and Remael, A. (2007) *Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling*. Manchester: St Jerome.

Faiq, S.(2004) Cultural Encounters in Translation From Arabic. in Faiq.S.(ed) *Cultural Encounters in Arabic Translation*(1-13). Clevedon (UK) & New York: Multilingual Matters.

Guerra, A. F. (2012) Translating Culture: Problems, Strategic and Practical Realities. *Art and Subversion*. (1):1-27.

Hatim, B. and Munday, G. (2004) *Translation: An Advanced Resource Book*. London and New York: Routledge.

Kahf, M.(2010) Packaging ‘Huda’: Sha’rawi’s Memoirs in the United States Reception Environment. In Baker, M. (ed) *Critical Readings in Translation Studies* (30-46). London & New York: Routledge.

Nye, J.S. (2004) *Soft Power – The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs.