

My homeland is translation

A story of falling in love

Malika Embarek Lopez

I'd like to begin with an explanation of my choice of title for this article. What do I mean by translation? What do I mean by homeland? And what do I mean by falling in love?

Even though I also translate contracts, birth certificates, wills, and business texts, when I talk about translation I mean literary translation.

By homeland I don't mean the homeland in the motto *Todo por la patria* ('Everything for the homeland') over the entrances to military barracks in Spain. Nor do I mean *Allah, al-watan, al-malik* ('God, homeland, king'), written in enormous letters on a hill that can sometimes be made out in the distance from a road in Morocco.

The homeland I mean echoes many writers in different ways – Juan Goytisolo and Juan Gelman 'My homeland is language', Thomas Mann 'My homeland is the German language', Fernando Pessoa 'My homeland is the Portuguese language', Albert Camus 'The French language is my homeland' and Jorge Semprun

'Language is my homeland'. All these authors have, in one way or another, been touched by their experience as displaced people, either in their own country or another, as Edward Said so aptly described in *Reflections on Exile*:

"Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is *contrapuntal*. For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment."

A place of freedom

So, this is the terrain of translation. As the daughter of a Christian Spaniard and a Muslim Moroccan, from a young age I have moved between two (and sometimes more) languages, two cultures, two religions. This toing and froing, which led me, in the most natural way, to my profession, instilled in me a consideration for the other, the

different. That is precisely what the task of translation is about – that hospitable, free territory where the only boundaries are respect for the reader and for the authors' words, culture, and language which feed into my work as translator.

My homeland could be described in the same way as Carlos Fuentes describes the novel in *Geografía de la novela* "the common ground of the imagination and the word, where those denied can come together and tell the stories forbidden by the deniers." As such, a place of freedom.



'Alaroza's' hennaed hand
Photo: Salima Abdelwahab

My homeland is a territory where through my efforts (based on those of the author) I can take up Michal Ignatieff's idea of having a black person

read a white person, a woman a man, a child an adult, a believer an atheist, a heterosexual a homosexual. And the greatest satisfaction is that the reader of my translation can be touched in the same way as the reader of the original.

“Writers then resort to the translators' tools”

That universality of translation, which is achieved without wiping out the identity of the original text, is also related to, or at least I like to think it is, the universality of Sufi mysticism, which manifests itself through the acknowledgement of the other. When, as in my case, we find ourselves among texts by Maghrebi authors from an Islamic background, we need this universalism as an antidote against ideologies which are exclusive and excluding and which, out of ignorance and fanaticism, despise the other.

Writers using the translators' tools

And now for the third element in the title of my article – falling in love. This refers to the passionate love I feel for my mother's language, Spanish, and my father's, Moroccan Arabic, or *darija*, which has no written form. Darija finds itself in that anomalous linguistic situation of diglossia, as is the case in other Arabic-speaking countries, where a language that only has a written register, classical Arabic, coexists with mother tongues that are exclusively oral. In



Almacabra in Morocco with the Spanish coastline in the background
Photo: Yasmina Embarek Lopez

many cases this has led some Maghrebi writers to opt for writing in French, the language of their ex-coloniser and whose literature I have been translating into Spanish since the mid-1980s.

Many Maghrebi francophone writers find it difficult to be corseted in classical Arabic which has no oral register, as it isn't spoken in everyday life in any Arab country. In those moments when the narrator needs, especially in novels, to assert their identity, through Arab and Islamic cultural references, French just isn't sufficient. Writers then resort to the translators' tools: equivalence, modification, adaptation, transliteration, use of italics or bold, footnotes or glossaries. In these instances, the author *translates*. These hybrid texts require the translator to employ new strategies.

The translator into Spanish, on the other hand, has the advantage of being able to draw on more than 2,000 words of Arab origin, most of them now archaic, as those who last used

them were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula by the beginning of the 16th century. Since then, in Spain there are no longer any *almacabras* ('cemeteries') to bury Muslims in. Weddings where the

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alarozas ('young brides') apply *alheña* ('henna') to their hands are no longer celebrated, and there are no more *adules*, the notaries who registered the *acidaque* ('dowry'), the thirteen coins given by



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Malika Embarek Lopez
Photo: Private Archive

the bridegroom to the bride. Women no longer cover themselves with *jaiques* ('long cloaks'), the five daily *azalás* ('prayers') are no longer intoned and the profession of *alfajeme* ('barber') who circumcised boys, has disappeared.

Rescuing Arabisms

However, on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean, where those expelled from Al-Andalus settled a long time ago, all these terms are still in use in the 21st century in the vernacular mother tongue of the francophone author. They correspond almost exactly to the meaning that the author doesn't have in French: *le cimetière musulman* ('almacabra'), *la jeune mariée* ('alaroza'), *le sdaq* ('acidaque'), *le haïk* ('jaique'), *la prière* ('azalá'), *le coiffeur-exécutant* ('alfajeme') etc.

So, for the translator into Spanish, it is really a matter of rescuing these Arabisms in Spanish and giving them a new lease of life in the contemporary literary texts of Maghrebi writers in French. The strategy is to offer the author hospitality, make them feel at home in the translated text, so that

the Arab voices are integrated and can be heard, anew, in the translation. The reader in Spanish can perceive this sense of foreignness, as well as its authenticity and legitimacy because it is part of their linguistic heritage.

It has been in this translation territory of mestizo (like myself) texts where I have been able to freely embrace with love my two languages and I feel very grateful to the writers I have translated, Edmond Amran El Maleh, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Abdelwahab Meddeb and Leïla Slimani who have taught me a lot about myself.

*Translation from the Spanish
original by Anne Larchet*