

## THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN THE DIALOGUE OF CIVILISATIONS: WEST/ISLAMIC WORLD

 **Mouna Mallem**<sup>1</sup>

Department of English University Badji  
Mokhtar ,Annaba, Algeria

Email: [mounamallem@gmail.com](mailto:mounamallem@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6546-9286>

### Abstract

Globalization created a state of cultural diversity, which became an essential condition of human society. This new reality increased the interrelatedness among all countries and cultures. Consequently, the inter-civilizational dialogue became necessary for global peace and common prosperity. The lack of communication can be considered as the major reason that leads to other phenomena like racism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, or even more serious issues like clash of civilizations. For that reason, the focus of dialogue of civilizations spread from security like political and military fields, and social and economic fields into the area of culture, which is more likely to promote exchange and mutual learning. This paper will discuss how translation, as a means of interlingual communication works to exchange information between speakers of different languages, which helps them, know and understand each other. It will clarify its role in linking users of different languages to humanity and international society. The paper will also investigate the role of translation in fighting stereotypes and prejudices about the cultural “Other” by providing unbiased texts through which the latter is presented. Knowing that the ultimate goal of the dialogue of civilizations is the realization that all civilizations are different but equal, translation can help correct the illusion of Western dominance and its cultural supremacy by showing that all civilizations experience periods of rise and fall.

**Keywords:** Civilization, dialogue, Islam, translation, west.

### 1. Introduction

The relation between the Islamic and Western, Christian world has always been turbulent. In November 4, 1998, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a resolution, which designated 2001 as the Year of the Dialogue among Civilizations. .This attempt of reconciliation was unfortunately interrupted. The attacks on the United States, on September 2001 started an era of fear and uncertainty. The war against terrorism that followed put Islamic culture under the spotlight, particularly its relation to the West and the possibility of their coexistence.

Feelings of hatred between the two sides increased, Muslims felt they have become a target of America's war against terrorism. The anger and suspicion they felt rendered any attempt for a military collaboration or political negotiation impossible. People across the world are now perfectly aware that the open clash between the Muslim and the Western civilization was caused by the struggle for power. The West wanted nothing but to perpetuate its domination. It is according to Ajami (1993) "Using international institutions, military power and economic resources to run the world in ways that will maintain Western predominance, protect Western interests and promote Western political and economic values." (p.19)

Hence, international relationships are based on political and economic interests not on peaceful alliances. This fact makes public opinion in Muslim countries distrustful towards the West and its initiatives to start a dialogue with the Islamic world. These attempts are usually considered as means for the West to serve its interests and to contain and westernize the Islamic world. However, in a multicultural, globalized world, dialogue is no longer an option but a necessity. Politics and economy proved their inefficiency to bring the two civilizations together, the two fields are a source of tension and conflict.

Unlike the political and economic fields, the world of culture is naturally diverse. It brings people from different cultural backgrounds together and helps them discover each other. It is a world of ideas and this makes it more suitable for dialogue.

Ideas are exchanged through language, which is the most essential vehicle of communication. However, the interaction between people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds necessitates a medium. Translation ensures the spread of information, knowledge and ideas among different cultures. Larson (1998) defined it as the comprehension of the meaning of a text and the production of an equivalent text. It communicates the message or the source text in another language or the target language. In addition to its communicative function, language also holds the identity of people as it reflects their values and the way they see the world, for that reason, translation entails the understanding of the culture of different peoples.

The so-called clash of civilizations between the West and the Islamic world is at the heart due to a huge lack of communication. The two civilizations are definitely different but this is not the reason why they cannot reconcile. In fact, both make little if no effort to see what they consider as the other as it is rather than through stereotypes and prejudices. Translation is an act of transfer that eventually leads to intercultural communication. Such exploration and understanding of a different culture can help achieve the effective communication and co-operation that other fields failed to achieve.

## **2. Translation and the War of Representation**

Translating a text is an activity that takes a good knowledge of both the source and target language i.e.: the language of the original text and that to which one wants to make a transfer. The translator who is a bilingual writer becomes a bridge between two languages and between the cultures, they represent. This activity is an act of intercultural communication that brings people together and makes them understand each other's mentalities because the transfer of knowledge and information leads to an automatic discovery of cultures and civilizations.

Translation represents one of the best ways to provide people in the West with neutral representation of Islam and the Islamic civilization. In fact, the war against terrorism waged by America after September 11th was the most recent attack against the Islamic world; it was at the heart a war of representation. The way to the attack was paved by spreading prejudices and stereotypes about Islam. This eventually helped justify and legitimize the act of violence. Translation of works written by Muslim writers can help introduce Islam to people in the West as it really is.

The barriers which were set by governments between cultures can be broken down by translated works .Translation offers people a voyage beyond geographical boundaries as it allows them to discover different places ,societies and cultures that they have never encountered before. This direct contact between western readers and the original text translated into their mother language provides a more reliable source of information.

After September 11th attacks, many Americans came to know Islam and Muslims through the unfortunate incident, since some Quranic verses were decontextualized in order to represent Islam as a violent dogma that wants to annihilate all non-Muslims. This led to a huge wave of fear but also to an unprecedented curiosity towards a culture that Westerners had little knowledge about. The availability of a translated version of Quran in different languages allowed numerous non-Muslims around the world to see for themselves the real preaching of a religion that they knew only through biased media propaganda. The translated version of the Quran provided autonomy and neutrality. It allowed people to see what Islam consists of as it gave them the ability to read the original text and make their own conclusions. To the surprise of numerous people, the post September 11th curiosity led many people in the West to reach out for the Islamic world and research about Islamic culture. Many got rid of the fear and incomprehension they had towards Islam, and ironically, many others converted to it.

This is a real example of how translation allows people to read in their language a text that was not accessible before. This frees the individual as it exposes him to the source text without any filter or medium what would eventually free the public opinion This example shows us that the translated version of Quran allowed people in the West to understand Islam as it is, but also to stay vigilant and aware of media's manipulation that was meant to spread fear and xenophobia. It also gives us an idea about the importance of translation as it helps prevent the misuse and de- contextualization of any text.

The process of translation starts an ongoing relationship of exchange and exploration between cultures no matter how different these might be. By making texts from different cultures available and known to people who cannot read a certain language, translation helps shape a global world .It creates harmonious relationships that lead to peace between cultures and civilizations. It allows people to see the similarities between these cultures rather than to focus uniquely on differences.

### **3. Translation as Self-Representation**

Thanks to its ability to provide access into original texts, translation can help correct the image of Islam by providing a more true to reality representation. Translation of works written by Muslim writers can work as a medium that presents an unbiased vision of Muslim culture with all the contradictions that any culture may hold, presented by Muslims themselves. The distortion of the image of Islam and Muslims is not new. It dates back to the days of Orientalism. Edward Said (1979) linked his criticism to European colonial discourse

to the issue of representation. Western racist discourse pictured the East in a way, which is closer to mythology than to reality. This representation is based on stereotypes that are supposed to maintain Western power and domination. This discourse hinders any attempt to understand the Orient as it really is and keeps the relationship between the two entities one of struggle over power rather than peaceful co-existence.

In the present day, Muslims are presented as violent people and Islam as a regressive ideology incapable of dialogue with other cultures. These stigmatizing stereotypes are mainly spread by media. As people nowadays get informed from news and internet, they get to know Muslims and their culture through erroneous, overgeneralized propaganda that create the phenomenon of Islamophobia and keeps fuelling it.

The Islamic world has been denied for centuries the right of self-representation. Counter-discursive literature is one of the most powerful tools that give the ability to voice what has been hushed for centuries. It sheds light on the side of the story that the West dimmed and omitted. It helps rewrite history and correct stereotypes and prejudices. The reality of most Muslim peoples is still unknown to people in the West. In fact, most Muslim countries are ex-colonies of European countries namely the British Empire and France. This makes the discrimination against Muslims multi-faceted. All what people in the West know about the Muslim peoples is in fact a result of the European imperial discourse.

Counter-discursive literature, whether written directly in English or French or translated from other languages like national or indigenous languages of ex-colonies, aims to correct the picture painted by the West. It provides a new, more realistic image of these peoples. It is not evident that this new image can lead anyone to forget about prejudices buried deep in the collective unconsciousness of the West, but the existence of this opposing, defying representation liberates these people and helps them retrieve their ability to impose their own identity.

As a consequence, translation allows people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to re-discover the cultural other through its own representation. Writing back is a right and a duty of any oppressed, discriminated against group which has been exclusively portrayed by its oppressor. Translation can provide an auto representation and help people from the West make a difference between Islam as represented by Muslims and the picture, created by the West and believed during centuries just because no other version existed.

In addition to counter-discursive literature, the availability of translated texts in different fields: art, philosophy and others can certainly liberate the Muslim world from the monopoly of Western representation imposed on it for centuries. These works help also people in the West to understand that Muslims have different opinions about both their culture and the West. When it comes to Islam, media in the West tends to shed light on extremists and neglect the majority of Muslims in different countries who are also against them. Therefore, the real worry should not be Islam but extremism. Some Muslims even want to separate religion from politics and wish for a modern model of their societies.

This can be seen obviously in the writings of many Muslim writers, researchers and modern philosophers, novelists and artists who aspire for social and political reform that would help achieve a modern version of Islam. The translation and popularization of such works will expose the western media's arrogance, ignorance, and its overgeneralized conception of Islam and Muslims. It will show the multi-faceted nature of the Islamic culture.

Most people in the Islamic world, who suffer from tyranny, aspire for prosperity and democracy but they do not necessarily want to follow the Western model or need to be civilized or modernized by the West. Every society has its specificities, and if people wish for reform, they will never accept to change their identity. This shows that cultures and civilizations need to meet in the middle, in a globalized world where they are constantly exposed to each other, translated works can give a clear idea about the public opinion in the Islamic world .It will clarify that even Muslims themselves can be very different .Even if some of them wish for an improved existence, a different societal model , the Western interference-justified by imposing democracy and reform\_ will never be welcomed or accepted .Thus, the West needs to stop infantilizing the Islamic world and impose its world view on it.

Thus, translated works written by Muslims can give an insight into their culture, but most importantly about the dynamics that regulate their society. The fact that Muslims do not have a unified vision of their religion, nullifies all Western claims that Muslims represent one hostile entity that aims to destroy the West.

#### **4. Translation as Preservation of a Nation's Heritage**

According to the Oxford Learner's Pocket Dictionary,( 2003) ,Civilization is the culture and way of life of a society or country at a particular period in time. This definition clarifies that civilization differs from one country to another, and in the same country from one epoch to another, so civilization as a concept is diverse .Each country has a specific system and a way of life that sets it apart from other countries. This diversity of civilizations is a natural and a positive thing that should be encouraged and preserved. However, the West's economic superiority had it claim that the values it represents are higher than those of Islam are, what eventually led it to feel entitled to spread and impose its worldview.

Since September 11th, America has been waging a furious media campaign in which it represents Islam as a total absence of civilization. The occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq was paved by a hostile Othering of the Islamic world i.e.: "transforming its difference and particularity into a deviation from the norm which is Western civilization" (Said, 1979,p.3) The stigmatizing stereotypes depicted Muslims as violent, under developed people who never actually contributed to human civilization and global progress, what made it extremely necessary for the West to modernize and democratize them.

However, the American media blackout cannot erase centuries of Muslim enlightenment and prosperity or deny the role this civilization played during its peak. Even though the current economic state of most Muslim countries is one of decline and underdevelopment, this does not make the Islamic culture inferior. Muslim scholars and scientists contributed tremendously to the development of other civilizations. They provided inspiration and help while the west itself was in a state of decline. Their works were considered as a reference and were translated to different languages for the originality of their ideas. The translated human heritage witnesses that all civilizations owe each other as they all contribute to the development and progress of human race and human civilization.

These translated works, which helped different cultures evolve show that underdevelopment and decline are not inherent to any civilization. These temporary states reflect the natural shift of power among civilizations. The translated works written by Muslims protect their bright history. This same heritage that was translated and participated to the development of other civilizations proves that any civilization has its share of

contribution in human progress. This in itself shows that the relationship between cultures is one of complementarity and exchange not of clash and dominance.

The Islamic civilization, which flourished from the seventh to approximately the 14<sup>th</sup> century in both Central Asia and the Iberian Peninsula in Spain, reached its peak while Europe struggled through the dark ages. It provided an example to the West in different fields: scientific, artistic and philosophical. Muslim scholars significantly contributed to different aspects of knowledge: chemistry, mathematics, astronomy, religion, geography, theology, and sociology.

The philosophy manuscripts by Ibn Sina, al-Farabi, Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Bajjah and Ibn Rushd, and the medical manuscripts by Ibn Sina and al-Razi quickly spread all over Europe.

Ibn Sina's -better known in the West as Avicenna-Al-Qānūn fi al-tibb (The Canon of Medicine) was considered the fundamental reference book in studies of medicine in Europe. Abul-Qasim Al-Zahrawi : known in Europe for his work, Concessio (Kitab al-Tasrif).

(Jabir Hayyan) chemistry: mathematics (Khawarizmi).

Ibn Khaldun in the field of Sociology, geography civilization and history with his famous book 'al mouquadima' which is still known and used till today. (Bertolacci, 2018)

The translation of these works written by Muslim scholars helped the West get out of its superstition. In addition to the prolific production of Muslims, they participated in the translation and preservation of the intellectual heritage of several nations like the Indians, Romans, and Greeks. They integrated their knowledge, built on it, spread it, and helped keep their ideas and creativity alive.(The Golden Age,n.d.para.8) Civilizations hence, go through cycles; they experience states of rise and decline that is why they benefit from each other's knowledge. Their relation is a natural state of sharing and exchange and they contribute to the advance of human kind at different epochs. The only medium to all these operations of communication and exchange between civilizations is translation, which allows for a durable and universal exploitation of the fruit of human intellect.

This is what made Caliphs like al-Rashid and al-Ma'mun (Abbasid rulers) encourage a translation movement, a formal translation of scholarly works. They wanted to make famous texts, such as Aristotle's works, available to the Arab world. Their goal was to translate as many of these famous works as possible in order to have a comprehensive library of knowledge and to preserve the philosophies of different nations.(The golden Age,n.d.para.9)

The activity of translation itself and the number of books translated by a nation can witness to the degree of progress a civilization has reached. It reflects its richness and openness on other cultures, its prosperity and its willingness to build bridges of communication and collaboration through exchange of ideas. Translation is the only medium that enables a nation to make its culture known to different peoples, to discover different works and expand its knowledge about other civilizations, but also about the world itself, what gives it more chances to see this latter from different perspectives and thus prosper and progress.

The Islamic intellectual heritage refutes any claims about the inherent rigidity and intolerance of Islam that the West claims. The immense scholarly revolution and the prosperity Muslims reached were in fact rooted in the most important characteristic of Islam: tolerance. Islam preaches against all kinds of discrimination; racial, ethnic...etc. This provided an atmosphere of freedom that allowed people to co-exist in an environment of peace and

mutual respect. This heritage does not only show the participation of the Islamic civilization to the well-being of humanity at large, it also negates the prejudiced view that Islam is a backward and intolerant dogma.

Civilizations are not meant to clash but to dialogue and learn from each other. The exchange of knowledge through translation is the element that can bring different nations together. This is one of the most important preaching of Islam indeed. It encourages people to travel and explore the world, but most importantly to meet different people, learn their languages and learn from them “ *O mankind !We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes ,that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other!)(49:13)*

Diversity and multiplicity of cultures is a natural state that works to fuel human curiosity to reach out for other nations in order to learn from their knowledge and their human experience. Translation is thus necessary as it makes all encounter and exchange possible. It is an act of creation that is supposed to bring different peoples together, help them know each other, exchange and benefit from each other’s knowledge and traditions. In fact, it preserves the accumulated human knowledge, which belongs to humankind in general, and keeps it evolving and growing.

Cultural interaction and peaceful coexistence between civilizations guarantee prosperity and progress for all. History witnesses to the beauty, richness and the diversity of the Islamic culture. It was a result of harmonious contributions of Muslims from different colours and ethnicities, and non-Muslims as well. This fact can also reveal a more interesting characteristic of civilizations in general. Openness, tolerance and cooperation help any civilization prosper, ethnocentrism, rigidity and clash isolate a nation, weaken it and lead to its decline. It is only through encounter and exchange that a culture guarantees to achieve progress and continuation. Communication and relations of mutual respect with different cultures allow any civilization to reach universality by spreading its knowledge so that its heritage could be preserved to next generations of humankind.

Lessons should be learnt from history. The present state of the Islamic world is a result of different factors like the decline of scientific activity, rigidity and rejection of change. Its unwillingness to open up and communicate with other cultures will certainly end it. It will hinder its chances to improve, evolve, and spread its culture in order to preserve it. No one denies that it is harder for civilizations to open up at times of decline; out of fear of being overwhelmed by stronger, dominant cultures, however, the present rigidity of the Islamic world will cause more harm than good.

Communication is no longer an option in a globalized world .It would enrich Islamic culture but also guarantee its survival. Unfortunately, this latter kept fighting change and transformation, this did not lead to its preservation and protection from acculturation, but it rendered it stagnant and unfit to meet the needs of the present, this might even make it perish eventually .The same rigidity can be used by the West against the Islamic world and justify its endless attempts to interfere and impose what it calls universal ideals of individual freedom.

The art of translation gives a glimpse into different cultural and intellectual aspects of the life of a certain people. It reflects their history, religious practices and their day-to-day existence. This helps both sides look critically to both self and to the other .Translated works give insight into people’s convictions and beliefs, what makes them question their own culture and look at it differently ,what would alter their perception of the world around them.

Recognizing and acknowledging the difference of the other is a good start to communicate with them. It leads to look at other cultures but also one's own culture critically, to evaluate its practices and recognize its flaws. Knowing the good and the bad in both sides, calls for dialogue and exchange of ideas, habits and anything that can improve human existence in general.

Exchanging knowledge and establishing relations of mutual respect between individuals and communities, translation preserves the cultural heritage of nations. The latter can reflect and witness for the participation of a particular culture to human progress and human civilization. Thus, translation can refute claims about the inferiority of some cultures, reduce attempts of dominance between cultures, and replace them with relations of mutual respect, exchange and complementarity.

## 5. Conclusion

The relationship between the Muslim world and the West is very complicated .Although their history is sure full of beautiful examples of peaceful co-existence, humans are more likely to remember stories of victory and domination. In a capitalist world where economic interests justify all exploitation, many fields proved their failure to bring the two civilizations together as they are meant to implement and maintain Western supremacy.

The field of culture presents itself as the only bridge left that could help both sides meet in the middle. Translation is a natural and innate need in all humans to discover other cultures and made one's culture known to others. Humans made use of language as a medium to transfer not only texts that have the ability to broaden the horizons and change the minds, but also to discover the cultures those languages hold. This interconnection between language and culture is the key that gives translation the ability to set constant dialogue and mutual respect between cultures. Along with the exchange of information and ideas, a cultural exchange follows naturally. Translation enables people to get insight into different people's mentalities and understand their particular human condition.

What causes clash of civilizations is the fact that some believe in hierarchy of cultures i.e.: some cultures are superior to others what makes them entitled to impose their worldview and life style. Translation preserves the cultural heritage of different civilizations both at home and abroad. This intellectual legacy refutes all claims that some cultures are void and never participated in human progress. It rather clarifies the relationship between civilizations, which is one of constant exchange. All civilizations contribute to the advance of human kind, each at its pace, at a different time. Knowledge is the legacy of all humans, it has been accumulating and transforming by different peoples and civilizations. Each of them uses the knowledge of prior cultures, incorporates it into their own knowledge and leave it to future generations of human beings to use it. Translation thus guarantees generational continuity but most importantly the survival of human kind.

Image nowadays is the most powerful medium of communication. Translation can prove its efficiency in transforming images and representations especially for groups and cultures, which have been denied the right for a self-portrayal. Translation equips individuals in the West with the freedom to get direct, one on one encounter with these cultures and civilizations and thus ,it participates in liberating these peoples from the confining frame ,it fights Western monopoly of representation and helps them impose their identity and show the world who they really are.



Translation helps people criticize their own cultures, practices and question their beliefs. It helps fight dogmatism and extremism as the exchange helps people on both sides see what is good in the other and that each culture has something to offer, something that the rest of the world can learn and benefit from. Cultural diversity is a source of richness and development of human kind that is why it should be protected to guarantee the continuity of human existence.

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