

## Lost in Translation: A Translation Quality Assessment of Culture-Specific Items in the English Translation of Ali Al-Muqri's Adeni Incense

### Abstract

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This study investigates the quality of the English translation of Ali Al-Muqri's novel *Adeni Incense* (bukhūr adanī) (2014), published by Dar Al Saqi and subsequently translated into English by Christiaan James and released by Dar Arab in 2023, using the House (2015) model for Translation Quality Assessment. A qualitative approach is used to highlight the cultural context of the ST and the implications of its overt and covert translation on the representation of the Yemeni global identity. The study concludes that the novel was translated overtly. Yet, some covertly translated sections demonstrate that a translation of a text rich in cultural elements can be adjusted to enhance the transference of the source-text culture. The research found the House (2015) model valuable for assessing the translation of a cultural text, especially for illuminating the relationship between language, power, and ideology.

**Keywords: Translation Quality Assessment, Julian House (2015) TQA Model, Ali Al-Muqri, Covert & Overt Translations.**

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## فقدان المعنى عند الترجمة: تقييم جودة ترجمة المصطلحات الثقافية في الترجمة الإنجليزية لرواية علي المقرري بخور عدني

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### المستخلص

بحثت هذه الدراسة جودة الترجمة الإنجليزية لرواية بخور عدني لعللي المقرري الذي نشرت في ٢٠١٤ من قبل دار الساقى وترجمها كريستيان جيمس في 2023 ونشرتها دار عرب. من خلال استخدام نموذج هاوزيه (٢٠١٥) لتقييم جودة الترجمة. تم استخدام نموذج هاوس للمصفاة الثقافية والترجمة الصريحة والخفية. تم استخدام نهج أسلوب مختلط جمع بين النهج الكمي والكيفي لاستجلاء وتوضيح نموذج هاوزيه. إضافة إلى مسرد يتكون من ترجمات الباحث المقترحة لتكون بديلة عما وجد انها غير كافي في النص الهدف من ناحية الاتصال الثقافي. تم تصنيف النصوص وفقاً لتصنيف نيومارك الثقافي. وهدفت الدراسة الى تسليط الضوء على السياق الثقافي للنص الأصل وتوابع ترجمته سواء كانت خفيه او صريحه. وتم طرح كل هذا في ضوء نقاش هاوس عن العولمة، الأيدولوجيا وديناميكيات القوة. وجدت الدراسة ان النص قد ترجم بطريقة خفيه، مع ذلك هناك بعض المصطلحات الثقافية التي ترجمت بوضوح تظهر بان ترجمة نص غني بالمصطلحات الثقافية قد يمكن تعديله لتحسين نقل ثقافة النص الأصل. وان تقنيات الجهرية الواعية ومنها النصوص المحاذية تيسر توطين النصوص ونقل الثقافة وبذلك يتم حفظ نزاهة النص الأصل. وجدت الباحثة ان نموذج هاوزيه (٢٠١٥) ثميناً في تقييم ترجمة نص ثقافي خصوصاً بما يتعلق بتوضيح العلاقة. بين اللغة، القوة، الأيدولوجيا والدور المهم الذي تلعبه الترجمة في عالم تسوده العولمة.

\* طالبة ماجستير، ترجمة، الأكاديمية اليمنية للدراسات العليا، الجمهورية اليمنية.

© نُشر هذا البحث وفقاً لشروط الرخصة Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)، التي تسمح بنسخ البحث وتوزيعه ونقله بأي شكل من الأشكال، كما تسمح بتكييف البحث أو تحويله أو الإضافة إليه لأي غرض كان، بما في ذلك الأغراض التجارية، شريطة نسبة العمل إلى صاحبه مع بيان أي تعديلات أُجريت عليه.

## Introduction

Throughout the years, the concept of TQA has evolved into a specialized domain within translation studies. It has concentrated on evaluating the effectiveness of a translation in addressing the requirements of both the source and target language audiences. Numerous models were established to evaluate the quality of translations. Some of the notable models are Reiss (1968, 1971, 1973), Koller (1974), Wilss (1974), van de Broeck (1985, 1986), Amma (1990), Jacqueline D'Hulst (1997), Robert Larose (1998), Jamal Al-Qinai (2000), Malcolm Williams (2004), and Juliane House (1979, 1981, 1997, 2015).

Translation of Yemeni novels into English has been rather scarce compared to other Arab countries like Egypt, Syrian, Iraq and Palestine. According to Altobai (2023), only three Yemeni literary works were translated from 2008 to 2019, highlighting the need to promote Yemeni literature in academia especially since literary texts have broad social and cultural implications. One example of socio-cultural writings are those of Ali Al-Muqri, who is a well-known Yemeni author. In his novel *Adeni Incense*, he uses incense, an Adeni singularity, as a unique cultural perfume, embracing Aden's ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity.

## The Theoretical Framework

Translation Quality Assessment is a crucial tool in the field of translation studies, gaining significant attention in theory and practice. The 2015 model by German linguist Juliane House has been highly praised by translation studies experts. Most notable in the model is its functional pragmatic background and discussions of the overt/covert typology.

In House's model, analysis is categorized into Register and Genre, where Register consists of three subcategories. The first of these subcategories is Field, which focuses on the topic or content with varying specificity in lexical items, classified as specialized, general, or popular. It includes the Hallidayan processes (Material, Mental, Relational) (House 2015, 64). Then comes Tenor, which examines the people involved—addresser and addressees—and their interactions concerning social power, distance, and emotional intensity

(House 2015, 64). This dimension examines participants' characteristics, including interpersonal dynamics and societal attitudes.

The third is the Mode dimension, which refers to both the channel—spoken or written (which can be "simple," e.g., "written to be read," or "complex," e.g., "written to be spoken as if not written")—and the degree of potential or real participation between the writer and the reader (House 2015, 64). House aimed to enhance her model by adding the Genre parameter, which describes deeper textual structures and connects texts to the "macro-context" of the linguistic and cultural community.

The genre parameter highlights the text's cultural context, including its composition, date, and purpose. The assessor reads the TT and ST to create a textual profile, as categorized by register and genre. This analysis identifies the textual function and assesses how well the target texts maintain the register, based on translation typology. House divides this typology into overt and covert translations, with the choice depending on the translator, the text, its interpretation, reasons for translation, the implied reader, and publishing policies.

Additionally, House's model defines text quality as the extent to which the translation's textual profile and function align with the originals. At the end, House's model includes two statements: the function statement, which covers ideational and interpersonal function, and the statement of quality which provides the assessor's final evaluation based on the findings of the analysis. The model classifies errors into overt and covert, where covert errors involve dimensional mismatches, while overt errors relate to denotative breaches in the target language system (Youssef 249). This classification can aid assessment advancement but may challenge objective categorization.

### **Previous Studies**

House's TQA model has been widely employed to evaluate translations from Arabic to English, highlighting the complexities involved. In a notable analysis of the *Hilali Epic*, Hassan (2015) focused on the differences in cultural terms, register, genre, and meaning between the source text (ST) and the target text (TT). His findings illustrated the difficulties translators face in

maintaining cultural integrity while making the text accessible. The study indicated that the TT frequently lacks the same functional depth as the ST. Further studies, such as those by Obeidat and Ayyad (2022), focused on specific translation errors in Naguib Mahfouz's *Awlad Harttna*, revealing how cultural differences can impact translation accuracy. By comparing two translations through House's model, they identified errors that hindered the quality of the TT. Similarly, Elalami (2020) evaluated the English translation of Ibn Arabi's *Diwan, The Interpreter of Desires*, noting challenges in retaining culturally significant terms while bridging spiritual and cultural dimensions.

The collective insights from these studies, including those by Ghafouripour and Eslamieh (2018), Faryad et al. (2021), and others, emphasize the critical role of cultural understanding in literary translation. The importance of familiarity with both source and target cultures is therefore noted, along with the limitations of existing models, such as House's, in addressing register and genre.

### **Research Gap and Significance**

Although the field of TQA has attracted significant interest in translation studies in Yemen, there is a lack of TQA studies of Yemeni translated literature. This study addresses the gap in research by evaluating the translation quality of culture-specific items in Christaan James's translation of *Adeni Incense* (2023). The translation by Dar Arab emphasizes the contemporary relevance of Yemeni novels, especially those by Ali Al-Muqri. The study aims to address critiques of translations of foreign works and to challenge misconceptions about Yemenis and their culture.

### **Research Questions**

In this research, I raise a number of questions as follows:

1. What are the culture-specific items in the source and target texts?
2. Were the source culture items overtly or covertly translated?

3. What are the implications of a Covert/Overt translation of culture-specific items in the text, with consideration of House's discussion of globalization and translation?

### **Methodology**

To answer these questions, the study investigated the quality of the translation of culture-specific items from Al-Muqri's 2014 novel *Adeni Incense*, and its 2023 English translation by Christaan James, employing the House (2015) model for TQA. Furthermore, the research is conducted through a qualitative method, using Qualitative Content Analysis represented in the House model, and a descriptive analysis of how well the meaning contained in the research data is translated, and of the relationships between the strategies used, and their implications for the culture in translation.

The data were extracted from both the Source Text (ST) and Target Text (TT) using a purposive, non-random sampling method, depending on their relevance to Adeni culture. Given that the novel includes a large number of culture-specific items, the data were selected to effectively represent the study's objectives. The data is then assessed through the steps proposed by the House model.

### **<sup>1</sup>Data and Analysis**

The quality of the TT was assessed by employing House's register and genre categories to generate ST and TT profiles and a subsequent section highlighting some of the essential excerpts through a comparison of the profiles, leading to a Statement of Quality. The house model has two main parameters: register and genre. Register is shaped by the choice of utterance form and meaning, determined by Field (conceptual), Tenor (interpersonal), and Mode (textuality).

### **Field**

The following table illustrates the authors of the texts and explicates the field category by identifying the novel's social matter and social action.

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<sup>1</sup>The tables in this section were adopted from Al-Aizari's (2023) paper *The Application of House's (2015) Translation Quality Assessment Model to Arabic-English Translation*.

Source Text & Target Text	Social Matter	Social Action
Source text profile <i>Adeni Incense (bukhūr adanī)</i> by Ali Al-Muqri	Novel colonialism, multiculturalism, orientalism)	(identity, General and specific
Target text profile English Translation of <i>Adeni Incense</i> by Christiaan James	Novel colonialism, multiculturalism, orientalism)	(identity, General and specific

Lexical Mismatches  
 Relational Process

1. ST: عدن حُلِّي السواد والبسي الأخضر  
 الإنجليزي انتصر، جرمان وطلبيان تكسّر. (ص. ١٤٢ س. ٧-٨)

a. TT: Aden, adorn yourself in blackness

And clothe yourself in green

The British won

And the Germans and Italians have been shattered (p. 136 lines 1-4).

b. Suggested translation/note: O, Aden, shed your black shroud

And clothe yourself in green

The British won

And the Germans and Italians have been shattered.

c. Comments: The TTA mistranslated the word "حُلِّي", pronounced with a damma, into a word of the opposite meaning. The SL term means to remove one's clothes. The TTA mistook the word "adore" as "adornments," which is a mismatch. The novel is mainly centered on issues of Adeni identity and its expression in the context of the world at the time of the novel's setting. The quotation above demonstrates Adeni attitudes toward war.

### Tenor

The following table illustrates the authors of the texts and explicates the tenor category by identifying the author's provenance and stance, social role relationship, social attitudes, and participation.

Source Text & Target Text	Author's Provenance and Stance	Social Relationship (Symmetrical/Asymmetrical)	Role	Social Attitude	Participation (Addresser/Addressee)
Source text profile <i>Adeni Incense (bukhūr adanī)</i> by Ali Al-Muqri	Writer <sup>1</sup> / Yemen/ Resides in France	symmetrical		Colloquial and Self-Orientalist	Complex: Dialogue, active participants, inner monologue
Target text profile Translation of <i>Adeni Incense</i> by Christiaan James	Diplomat-Translator/ United States of America	symmetrical		Colloquial, Orientalist	Complex: Dialogue, active participants, inner monologue

### Syntactical Mismatches

ST: "أنا فدا العولقي اليماني" قالت وبدا لي أنه شعر. "اكتب هذا في البداية" أوضحت. (ص. ١٦٦ س. ٢-١)

- TT: "I'm Fadwa Al-Awliqi Al-Yamani," she said, and to me, it sounded like poetry. "Put that at the top of the letter," she clarified. (pg. 159 lines 1-2)
- Suggested translation/note: "Oh, how I love and would give my life to Al-Awliqi Al-Yamani," she said, and to me it sounded like poetry. "Put that at the top of the letter," she clarified.

- c. Comments: The TTA mistakes the phrase *انا فدا* to mean that the person is named Fadwa. This class shift occurred due to the cultural gap between SL and TL cultures regarding endearment.

### Mode

Source Text & Target Text	Medium
	(Simple/Complex)

Source text profile	Simple (written to be read)
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*Adeni Incense (bukhūr adanī)* by Ali Al-Muqri

Target text profile	Simple (written to be read)
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*Adeni Incense* by  
 Christiaan James

### Textual Mismatches

ST: ”يا ليت عدن قريبة<sup>1</sup>“، كُنْتُ أُغَنِّي لِمَامَا وَأَنَا أَتَتَّبَعُ الصَّخْبَ فِي أَوَّلِ اللَّيْلِ. قَلْتُ لَهَا: غَنِّي الْمَغَنِّي ”يا طائرة طيري على بندر عدن 1“، وكأَنَّه بعيد عن عدن، فيما هو فيها. (ص. ٣٣٤ س. ٢٠-٢١)

a. TT: I used to sing the lyrics. How I wish Aden were near to Mama while listening to the din and hubbub at the start of each night. I would tell her: “The crooner sang, "O aeroplane, soar high above the port of Aden," as if he were far away from Aden despite being right there.” (pg. 323 lines 23-26)

b. Suggested translation/note: I used to sing the lyrics. How I wish Aden were near Mama while listening to the din and hubbub at the start of each night. I would tell her: “The crooner sang, "O aeroplane, soar high above the port of Aden," as if he were far away from Aden despite being right there.”

c. Comment: The ST uses quotation marks to distinguish the song title from the rest of the passage. The TTA fails to do so and uses no stylistic tool to distinguish the song title and upsets the theme-rheme connection.

### Genre

Source Text & Target Text	Genre

Function

Text			
Source text profile	Novel	(narrative,	Ideational
<i>Adeni Incense (bukhūr adanī)</i> by Ali Al-Muqri	multiculturalism, identity)		Interpersonal Textual
Target text profile	Novel	(narrative,	Ideational
<i>Adeni Incense</i> by Christiaan James	multiculturalism, identity)		Interpersonal Textual

### Statement of Quality

The TTA adopted a framework of foreignization and used transliteration primarily without footnotes or a glossary. He could have lessened the cultural gap by employing cultural transposition techniques to translate the text more mindfully. The TT itself is overtly translated. Transliteration aims to maintain foreignness but fails in *Adeni Incense* contexts since foreignization highlights negative Oriental differences, whereas domestication merges cultures.

Furthermore, in the register categories, mismatches occur due to ideological manipulation, the lack of paratextual explication, the lack of knowledge of SL terminology, transliteration, omission, class shifts, insufficient transfer of metaphorical and idiomatic meaning, rhetorical failure, and stylistic tool failure. These mismatches hinder the text's ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions.

### Conclusion

It is more critical to preserve than to transfer a subaltern source culture for the sake of global assimilation towards the global reader whose world has been shaped by globalization. This is the case as a result of the rapid technological advances and the need for quick information sharing; translation has become increasingly important in our globalized, de-territorialized world (House 2018, 4). In light of the study's findings, *Adeni Incense* should be covertly and mindfully translated, as the author presents a specific cultural context in his novel: multiculturalism.

Based on the research's findings and conclusions that support the globalization of Yemeni identity, allowing Yemenis to reclaim the narrative surrounding their culture, and based on House's discussion of the points above, the study recommends the following:

- 1- Adding courses to university curricula focusing solely on studying the translation of Yemeni literature.
- 2- Creating an online platform that allows foreign translators to engage with Yemeni translators when translating Yemeni literature.
- 3- Creating a transliteration chart of Yemeni dialects.

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