

Translation as Relocation of Culture in Iranian Migrant Literature: A Case Study of *Rooftops of Tehran*¹

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Abstract

Migration and translation are interrelated both involving moving across languages and cultures. Building on the tenet that translation could help migrants to relocate their culture, examining the intersection would be significant. This paper sought the occurrence of linguistic and cultural adjustments, as two faces of relocation, in Iranian's migrant writing in English to see whether migrants make any attempts to relocate the original culture. *Rooftops of Tehran* was examined as the corpus and Migrant's Relocation Model was developed by the researchers for data collection/analysis using MAXQDA 2020 software. The data included all segments which qualified as the subcategories of linguistic/cultural adjustments. After qualifying segments were coded, numerous adjustments were found. Cultural customs and traditions were the most frequent, followed by native words, cultural images, cultural values and beliefs, accented language and cultural themes. The results showed that the author actually made translational adjustments attempting to relocate the original culture and that these adjustments were so frequent that the text was characterized as translational. Through these adjustments, the author claimed a space for heterogeneity while simultaneously resisting dominant linguistic/cultural norms. This verifies that migrants are cultural mediators who translate to relocate their original culture in a new setting.

Keywords: Cultural Adjustments, Iranian's Migrant Writing, Linguistic Adjustments, Relocation, Translation

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1. Introduction

As Iranian diaspora expanded recently, a great bulk of non/literary migrant writing has emerged. Since “English-speaking countries are among the main migratory destinations for Iranians” (three out of five) (Hoseini, 2018, p. 1), migrant literature in English comprises the most salient part of Iranian’s diasporic literature, although there are noteworthy works in German, French, Dutch and Swedish.

Through an interdisciplinary perspective, the study approaches the dyad of migration/translation, recently explored by notable scholars including Cronin (2006), Polezzi (2012), Inghilleri (2017), Gentzler (2017), Bertacco and Vallorani (2021) and Nergaard (2021). Concepts are applied from translation studies, migration studies, cultural studies and literary studies. Linguistic and cultural traces are sought in *Rooftops of Tehran* (2009) by Mahbod Seraji (1956–), to see whether Iranian migrant authors actually make any attempts to relocate their original culture or prefer to promote the norms of the hosting country.

The novel was selected since it was written by a first-generation migrant living in the United States since 1976. It was highly admired by critics and was translated into 22 languages. Consequently, references to indigenous language/culture cannot be due to incompetence but they derive from preoccupation with Iran, as the author confirms, “At a time when the country of my birth is often portrayed in the news media as “the enemy,” I chose to tell a story about friendship and humor, love and hope, universal experiences valued by people in all times and places.” (Seraji, 2009, p. 310).

2. Literature Review

Several scholars assert that translation can help the relocation of culture, including Bhabha (1994), Cronin (2006), Buden et al. (2009), Nergaard (2021), Bertacco & Vallorani (2021). Translation is a “relocating act of meanings and texts but also of people and cultures” (Bertacco & Vallorani, 2021, p. 1). This implies that

people who move actually make room for their original language and culture through translation. Bertacco and Vallorani (2021) call these adjustments *relocation*, which necessitates translation. Such translational adjustments help migrants to identify themselves in the hosting communities.

Some previous studies tackled the issue of translation in migrant writing. To Farahzad (2004), a migrant writer resembles a postcolonial writer in that both are in search of new identities and they produce “texts which, linguistically and culturally, belong to the in-between world, a world located between the native and the colonizer’s/host culture” [my translation] (Farahzad, 2004, p. 75).

Mollanazar and Parham (2010) compared texts produced in diaspora with the texts written/translated in Iran and found that all categories showed a degree of hybridity, regardless of the location where they were published. In a separate study, Parham (2011) focused on hybrid texts produced in diaspora, distinguishing between concrete and abstract forms of diaspora. Translating and understanding hybrid texts requires a specific perspective or theoretical approach. One such approach is Fillmore’s Scenes and Frames Semantics (SFS), which can be used to explain the processes of hybridization, rehybridization, and dehybridization (Birjandi & Parham, 2015; Parham, 2010). Fallah and Barmaki (2014) examined postcolonial narration in novels by Iranian migrants and concluded that such novels translate the subalternity and otherness of migrants in the mainstream society using “the strategy of resistance” (Fallah & Barmaki, 2014, p. 189). Tafreshi Motlagh (2010) believes that migration literature “deals with the issues of language, translation, identity, race, diaspora, motherland myths, cultural difference and multiculturalism” (Tafreshi Motlagh, 2010, p. 218).

In a section of *National Identity in Literary Translation* (2019), Parham examines ‘National Identity in Persian Translated Immigrant Literature’. Concerned with identity issues, the study explores “a work of Iranian immigrant literature in

translation to see how these concerns with national identity and identification are treated and reflected in translation" (Parham, 2019, p. 193). The study concluded that identity concerns of the migrant author are, in fact, echoed back in Persian by the translator either consciously or by linguistic necessity.

This study is differentiated from previous studies in that it examined the relocational acts/assertions in a novel by an Iranian migrant writer in English to probe into the various forms of translation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design of the Study

This is a descriptive-analytical, corpus-based study whose basic question is whether Iranian migrant authors use linguistic and cultural adjustments to relocate Iranian culture or not. To answer this question, a mixed (qualitative/quantitative) method was applied to collect and analyze textual data.

3.2. Framework

The idea of 'Translation as Relocation' by Bertacco and Vallorani (2021) was selected as the theoretical framework of the study, based on which the model for data collection and analysis was designed. Since relocation describes "the cultural and linguistic adjustments" (Bertacco & Vallorani, 2021, p. 1) by migrants, this study examines the uses of Iranian linguistic and cultural items by migrant authors. Bertacco and Vallorani (2021) assert that any attempts to relocate a culture necessitate translation; consequently, migration, relocation and translation are interdependent thus inseparable. Migrant's relocation was incorporated in a model elaborated on in the methodology section.

3.3. Corpus

The novel, *Rooftops of Tehran*, by Mahbod Seraji was selected as the corpus, exemplifying Iranian migrant literature in English. It is a rich source of linguistic and cultural peculiarities in line with the purpose of this study.

3.4. Data Collection

The data of the study include all segments (words, phrases, sentences) in the corpus qualifying enough to be placed under sub/categories of the model designed by the researcher for data collection and analysis. Migrant's Relocation Model was developed using Bertacco and Vallorani's (2021) concept of 'translation as relocation' suggesting that migrants relocate their culture through linguistic and cultural adjustments including the use of native words/structures or giving credit to indigenous images, beliefs, customs, etc. The model could be figured as follows:

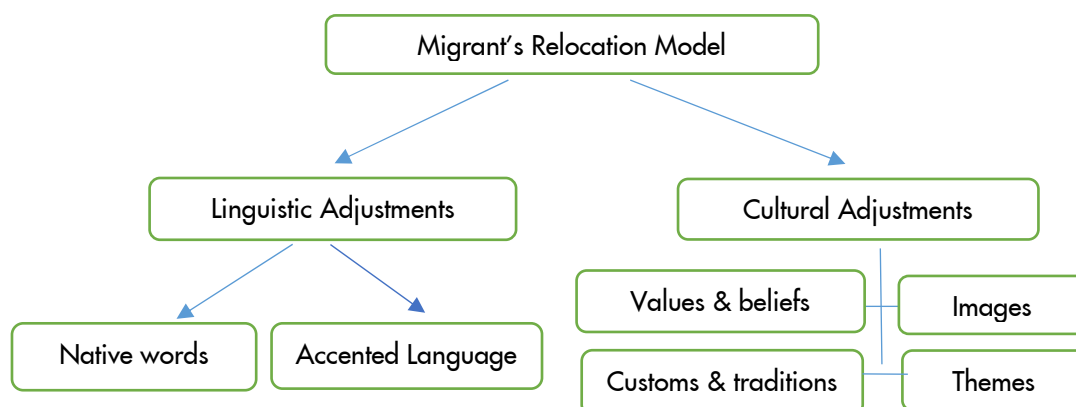


Figure 1. *Migrant's Relocation Model*

After importing the corpus to MAXQDA 2020 software, one of the best software available for qualitative and mixed methods data analysis, Migrant's Relocation Model was used for data collection. The model was primarily applied in the code system. Next, the corpus was closely studied and each segment that qualified a code was assigned one. The data included all segments of the corpus coded according to Migrant's Relocation Model.

3.5. Data Analysis

The segments were stored in the code system of MAXQDA software with the frequency against each code name demonstrating its prevalence. Using the visual tools provided by the software, the data were tabulated presenting the percentage of each sub/code. Higher percentage signified higher occurrence of the item in the corpus.

4. Results and Discussion

The data are analyzed to see whether Iranian migrant authors writing in an adopted language actually tend to share their linguistic and cultural repertoire with global readers, or they prefer to proceed with the current, as the milieu requires them.

4.1. Cultural Adjustments

As it was said earlier, cultural adjustments refer to adopting Iranian cultural concepts comprising four subdivisions as the code map extracted from MAXQDA software shows graphically:

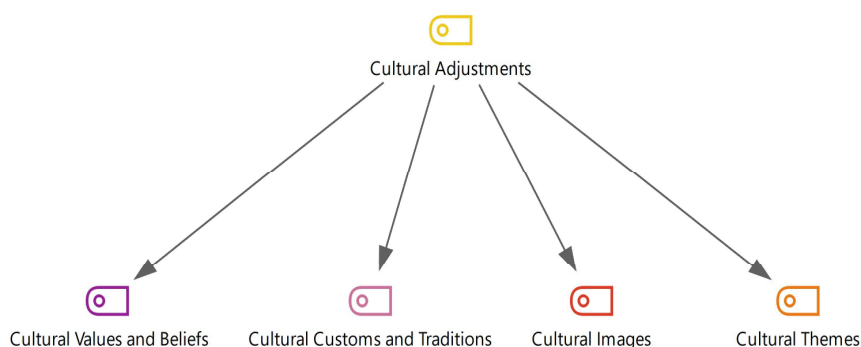


Figure 2. *Cultural adjustments subcode*

4.1.1. Cultural Values and Beliefs

Cultural values and beliefs are those shared by the majority of community members. In any culture “there are values and beliefs on which there is a general agreement; they are the basis of its identity; actions of social institutions and individuals focus upon them” (Dyczewski, 2016, p. 143). As observed by Farahzad and Ehteshami (2011), national identity is manifested in various aspects, among which cultural beliefs are the most notable ones. Regarding Iranian cultural values and beliefs, Azad Armaki et al. (2011) suggest that “the cultural values and beliefs of Iranians are divided between traditional and modern values and beliefs; ...with traditional cultural values and beliefs revolving around religion, family, seniority

and collectivism and modern ones revolving around independence, individualism and self-indulgence" [my translation] (Azad Armaki et al., 2011, p. 14).

Accordingly, 124 examples of adopting Iranian cultural values and beliefs were found in *Rooftops of Tehran*. Considering the setting of the novel (1973–1974, Tehran), traditional cultural values and beliefs are more prevalent. There are many segments representing respect for family and seniors, highly important in Iranian culture as in *"I love my father, and I would never disobey him"* (16). Similarly, concepts such as shamefulness and politeness are quite observable as in *"it's not polite to tell a friend's girlfriend that she is pretty"* (53).

Modern values such as individualism and defiance of tradition are noticeable as *"Take them [girls] out, go to the movies, go out to dinner"* (64). A segment reports on a teenage girl resisting an arranged marriage as *"she has locked herself in a room and refuses to come out, eat, or speak to anyone"* (30). Another modern value is admiring the privileges of the West as in *"If I was living in the United States, I'd be an inventor by now because Americans love new gadgets and support people like me who have brilliant ideas"* (94). Regarding the salience of religion, religious beliefs comprise another group as in *"when God closes one door, he always opens another!"* (36) and *"too religious to embrace a man who is not a blood relative!"* (289).

Not all cultural beliefs and values are positive. Many reflect dark points in the culture of a community. Regarding Iranian culture, examples include negative look towards women, patriarchy, superstition, giving credit to what other people think/say, projection and heavy reliance on fate, parental decisions for the future of children, intolerance of difference, etc. Some segments refer to the way men degrade women in a patriarchic society as in *"women can compete against one another in meaningful and appropriate roles specifically designed for them, such as raising children, teaching little girls, and cooking."* (80). Elsewhere, the narrator

disregards the possibility of a female doctor by saying *"I assumed she was a nurse because she was a woman"* (156). Another face of patriarchy shows in hyperbolic compliments on masculinity as in *"An educated guy like him? My God, can you imagine? Girls will throw themselves at his feet!"* (280).

Superstitious beliefs comprise a noteworthy bulk of disgraceful beliefs in Iranian culture. Examples include *"Don't count! Don't you know it's inauspicious to count people?"* (236), or *"If you ever pour water on a cat, wash your hands three times at the same time each day for three days, or you may get a cyst on the tip of your nose"* (111). In Iranian culture, what other people say about a person matters, especially regarding women as in *"We can't let the neighbors see we're getting together at Zari's house. They talk, you know. It wouldn't be good for the girls"* (52). Similarly, it is common not to assume responsibility for events. Fate is more likely to blame for what happens than individual decisions as in *"Sometimes it is wise not to fight the wind and accept things as they are"* (285).

Traditionally, Iranian parents feel free to make significant decisions for their children. Critical issues such as university major, studying abroad or getting married were mostly decided by parents. Examples include *"if he were a couple of years older, his mother would want him to marry Soraya."* (80) or *"this lively anticipation is tempered by my father's plans to send me to the United States to study civil engineering"* (16).

There is limited tolerance for differences in Iranian culture. People of different skin color, religion, race or even worldview may have a hard time in Iran as in *"In the past four years, Islamic extremists burned down her home, and her husband was attacked and beaten up several times"* (205).

4.1.2. Cultural Customs and Traditions

A cultural custom has been defined as *"a widely accepted, traditional way of behaving or doing something that is unique to a specific society, location, or time"*

and defines a tradition as a practice “passed down from generation to generation” (Rangel, 2022, p. 136). Accordingly, customs may appear for a short time and be practiced by a smaller number of people in a society but traditions are inherited from previous generations and are practiced by the majority of community members.

The data shows that 241 out of 613 cultural adjustments involve cultural customs and traditions. This verifies the higher frequency of this category (twice as many) as compared to others. This reflects the focus on translating Iranian customs and traditions which is quite justifiable considering the ancient history, geographical vastness and the ethnic variety inside Iran.

In *Rooftops of Tehran*, the story begins with an Iranian custom: “*Sleeping on the roof in the summer*” (15). The concept of ‘alley’, central to the story, is loaded with customs as in “*Women congregate in different parts of the alley*” (17). Some customs are temporarily formed as a response to specific situations in specific time periods as in “*That night a number of our family and friends come over for dinner to watch the trials*” (38) or “*kids ringing the bell and running away*” (44).

Lots of Iranian traditions could be seen throughout the corpus. One is reliance on herbal medicine as in “*herbal tea to cure depression, liquidated camel thorns to smash kidney stones,*” (17). There are references to national traditions including “*The Persian New Year, celebrated on the first day of spring*” (254). Various customs and traditions surround marriage in Iran. Traditionally, families are involved, with money being a central issue as in “*A guy who lives a couple of doors down from them is sending his parents to her house tomorrow night.*” (25), “*What does the groom have? Does he own a house?*” (27). Another tradition, not much followed now, is arranged marriage. Some segments address the issue and the criticism against it by younger people including “*No dating, no getting to know each other, no real opportunity to get acquainted*” (62).

Many customs and traditions are formed around religious instructions including *"she sacrificed a lamb a month and gave the most tender meat to the poor."* (256). Lots are associated with mourning and funeral following Islamic instructions as in *"A man in the front yells, "There isn't a God but the almighty God!" and the procession chants the same in unison after him."* (128), *"I sit down by the grave and say a final prayer for Doctor"* (131), or *"I lift the bucket and carry it to Doctor's grave, pouring the water on the stone."* (273).

Greeting customs and traditions are widespread including *"We all stand up and shake hands with him"* (166) or *"Ahmed's mother exchanges greetings with Faheemeh and asks if her parents are well"* (227). Women are levied with an extra overlay of customs and traditions because of the roles assigned to them as in *"She dusts, sweeps, washes the sheets, and tries to figure out where everyone will sleep"* (236).

Many references deal with school attendance, mostly reminding severe regulations and strictness as in *"Mr. Gorji brought a barber to school and forced Ahmed to get a number-two buzz cut"* (263). Some customs and traditions revolve around showing sad feelings such as helplessness and grief as in *"Zari's mother begins to chant while hitting herself in the head and pulling her own hair"* (84), or *"Doctor's mother beats herself in the head and scratches her face with her fingernails"* (85).

4.1.3. Cultural Images

The word 'image' refers to imagery as a literary term covering "those uses of language in a literary work that evoke sense-impressions by literal or figurative reference to perceptible or concrete objects, scenes, actions or states, as distinct from the language of abstract argument or exposition" (Baldick, 2001, p. 121). In simpler words, if words are used to help readers remember a scene, sound, taste,

smell or a touch, the author is using image. As it shows, it is linked to the lived experiences of the author/reader.

There are 148 references to visual sights, sounds, tastes, smells and tactility which evoke memories or experiences in the minds of Iranian readers, much different from what readers with non-Iranian backgrounds might imagine. Considering visual sight, some cultural images include *"A street vendor is selling boiled beets"* (94), *"the narrow alleys; the earthen, unpaved road"* (128), and *"A steaming samovar is in one corner of the room"* (231).

Concerning sounds as cultural image, examples include *"Some vendors announce their specials: The best kebob in town, hurry up before it gets cold"* (182). There are references to smells evoking cultural images, including *"the scent of wet dust"* (26), *"the scent of ... liver being grilled on hot red charcoal"* (182), and *"The smell of the freshly brewed tea"* (231). Concerning taste, examples include *"This is Lahijan tea, the best in the world,"* (161), or *"the savory Persian herb somagh, and baked tomatoes"* (223). There are references to tactile sense with cultural connotations as in *"He tells me to hold my hands out. Reluctantly, I do, and he hits me over and over with his ruler"* (175).

4.1.4. Cultural Themes

According to Opler, "in every culture are found a limited number of dynamic affirmations, called themes, which control behavior or stimulate activity". He further elaborates on cultural themes to be postulates that are "tacitly approved or openly promoted in a society" (Opler, 1945, p. 198). In Iranian culture, there are postulates that are generally affirmed. As Nina Evason reports on Cultural Atlas Website, Iranian people are recognized with "hospitality, thirst for knowledge, openness to innovation and technology, doublespeak, conservatism, dignity and shame, adhering to social expectations, etc." (Evason, 2016).

100 References to Iranian cultural themes are found in *Rooftops of Tehran* including “Everyone knows you don’t fancy a friend’s sister” (19), “This man may be a thief, but he is my guest—and a guest will always be treated like a lover of God in my house” (152), and “Some things must remain sealed in the cage of the soul” (235).

4.2. Linguistic Adjustments

Linguistic adjustments are among major adjustments applied by migrant authors. Such adjustments may be in the form of accented language or the use of native words, as the subcode extracted from MAXQDA software shows graphically:

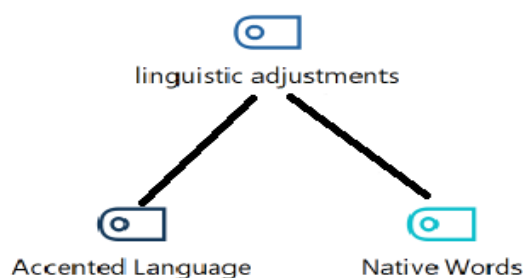


Figure 3. *Linguistic Adjustments Subcode*

These two strands together comprise the issue of hybridity, much debated in translation studies. The concept of hybridity is “closely interrelated with translations and diasporas” (Mollanazar & Parham, 2009, p. 30). To them, hybridity applies to translated and non-translated texts including migrant writing. Although migrant writing is not translated text, it shows signs of original language and culture of their authors and this is the way such authors find to translate their culture; in other words, they relocate their culture out of its supposed borders. This is the way they link migration trajectory to writing, translating and culture.

4.2.1. Accented Language

Many scholars including Bhabha (1994), Schaffner and Adab (2001), Snell-Hornby (2001), Farahzad (2004), Mollanazar and Parham (2009) and

Nannavecchia (2017) believe that writing in an adopted language is necessarily accented and translational since it is impossible to expel the original language and culture from one's mind and life. Bertacco and Vallorani (2021) set forth that a postcolonial/migrant author "often writes as a foreigner to a world readership of foreigners through a heteroglossic, or translational text" (Bertacco & Vallorani, 2021, p. 66). There are 109 cases of accented language in the corpus which may be syntactic or semantic. Regarding the long-term residence of the author in the U.S., it seems that accented syntax is used intentionally to expose the non-English narrator/characters. Some examples include "*just as good or even gooder*" (48) or "*If I was living in the United States*" (94).

Language accented semantically deals with concepts looking familiar to Iranians but not to English-speaking people, even nonsense if not explicated. Examples would include "*being called 'Mr. Engineer'*" (16), "*a big black eggplant under at least one eye*" (22–23), "*they'd make his ears the biggest parts of his body*" (23) and "*Twenty is God's grade*" (47).

4.2.2. Use of Native words

As another category of linguistic adjustments, 181 Persian words and expressions were used to show the intention of the author in highlighting the Iranian language through heterolinguality. Hosseini (2016) attribute this to globalization asserting that "in a globalized world, foreign words need not be avoided strictly" because "the exotic nature of the word contributes to the better understanding of the original culture" (Hosseini, 2016, p. 9). These words include the name of people and places, references to Iranian architecture, cuisine, personality traits, prominent figures, beliefs, traditions, items, etc. Examples of names are "*Pasha*" (18), "*Zari*" (22), "*Alborz Mountains*", "*Amjadieh Stadium*" (196), "*Kandovan road*" (159), "*Laleh Zar*" (182), and "*Qum*" (57).

There are references to personality traits, as in “both the husband and wife are very mehrbaan” (105), to architecture as in “he sat by the hose” (233), to political events as in “groups are referred to as kharab-kars” (37), to traditional jobs or titles as in “far-rash” (96), or “kad khoda” (151). Many prominent figures are recalled including “Simin Daneshvar” (48), “Rumi” (49), “Hafiz” (66), “Mosaddegh” (94), “Omar Khayyam” (174).

Many native words reflect customs and traditions as in “tradition in Iran called taarof” (37) or “fresh lavash for breakfast” (76). References to Iranian cuisine included “naan” (165), “torshi” (165), “khoresht” (165), “two paloodehs with Akbar Mashdi ice cream” (183), “Barbari bread” (252) and “chelo kebob” (223). Some cultural items mentioned were “an old Kirman rug” (212) and “the smoke of Ghalyan” (151).

After the qualifying segments were coded, 903 cases of cultural/linguistic adjustments were identified out of which 613 cases involved cultural adjustment and 290 cases included linguistic adjustment. The frequency of each subcode is represented in the following table:

Table 1. Code system and the frequency of each code

Code System	Frequency
Code System	903
<i>Cultural Adjustments</i>	613
<i>Cultural Values and Beliefs</i>	124
<i>Cultural Customs and Traditions</i>	241
<i>Cultural Images</i>	148
<i>Cultural Themes</i>	100
<i>linguistic adjustments</i>	290
<i>Accented Language</i>	109
<i>Native words</i>	181

The percentage of each subcode is listed in the following table.

Table 2. Codes/subcodes/percentage

Color	Parent code	Code	% Cod. seg. (all documents)
●	<i>Cultural Adjustments</i>	<i>Cultural Values and Beliefs</i>	13.73
●	<i>Cultural Adjustments</i>	<i>Cultural Customs and Traditions</i>	26.69
●	<i>Cultural Adjustments</i>	<i>Cultural Images</i>	16.39
●	<i>Cultural Adjustments</i>	<i>Cultural Themes</i>	11.07
●	<i>linguistic adjustments</i>	<i>Accented Language</i>	12.07
●	<i>linguistic adjustments</i>	<i>Native words</i>	20.04

As the tables above suggest, the results are consistent with the results of previous studies supporting the idea that migration literature has to do with translation and multiculturalism (similar to postcolonial literature) and that migrant authors show translational, hybrid features in their texts, reflecting their attempts to place themselves in an interlingual, intercultural space. The results follow the same line by adding the point that translational features in migrant writing are, in fact, attempts to relocate the original culture. Regarding the study, both linguistic and cultural adjustments are used by the author among which cultural customs and traditions have the highest frequency (26.69%) followed by the use of native words (20.04%), cultural images (16.39%), cultural beliefs and values (13.73%), accented language (12.07%) and cultural themes (11.07%). This illustrates the author's emphasis on translating Iranian customs and traditions as well as the language actually used by Iranian people. The high number and variety of linguistic and cultural adjustments employed positively answer the question posed in this study that the Iranian-American author was quite willing and intentionally loaded his writing with Iranian linguistic and cultural references to share his roots with the world. This can be interpreted as his translational effort to relocate the Iranian language and culture beyond the territory called Iran.

6. Conclusion

This study traced the translational attempts made by the author of *Rooftops of Tehran* to relocate the original culture in migrant literature. The results revealed numerous cultural and linguistic adjustments, illustrating the intentional efforts by the author to share original culture. This provides a positive answer to the research question. Examining the presence of relocalational attempts resulted in the following findings:

Relocation was observed in both forms of linguistic and cultural adjustments, with cultural adjustments being three times more frequent than linguistic ones. Elements in the text that qualify as linguistic adjustments represent either the semantic or syntactic traces of Persian language at word/sentence level in the text originally written in English. This way, migrant writing includes non-linear modes of translation between languages. Similarly, cultural adjustments were observable in the use of beliefs, traditions, images and themes peculiar to Iranian culture. So frequent adjustments suggest that the migrant author made intentional decisions to familiarize the readers with Iran and its cultural repertoire through a culturally-loaded text. By taking advantage of indigenous language and culture, the author moves in the direction of cultural translation by claiming a space for heterogeneity and promoting the original culture. Thus, migrant authors could be called cultural mediators who use translation as a strategy for intercultural communication.

This study was limited in the scope of data collection/analysis to only one example of Iranian migrant writing in English and did not include other languages; consequently, whether the results could emerge into a pattern was left to further studies. Another limitation was the hardship in accessing the books by Iranian authors in English within Iran which was handled through electronic files available in online repertoires or by contacting the authors.

Scholars in translation studies, cultural studies and literary studies may find the results of this paper interesting. It can help them develop a deeper understanding of the ways migrants deal with linguistic and cultural differences through translation and consequently become more insightful in analyzing the psychological, social and political consequences of migration.

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