Translation Studies, Winter 2026, Vol. 23, No. 92, pp. 37–52: **Scientific Research Paper**
DOR: https://dor.isc.ac/dor/20.1001.1.17350212.1404.23.4.4.0

'Translation Condition' in Iranian Diasporic Literature: Manifestation of Translation as Experience[10]

Mahtab Hosseini[11] & Mir Saeed Mousavi Razavi[12]

Abstract

Recently, translation was conceived as a personal experience undergone by immigrants whose lives were conditioned by translation through exposure to borders, hospitality issues and the way immigrants were figured. Translation in this broad sense might be textually represented in the literature immigrants penned. To examine this, a corpus by three groups of authors of Iranian descent was examined. The study sought to discover the most prominent translation condition. It also looked for differences among authors. To collect data, a model was developed drawing on the concept of *Migrant's Translation Condition*, involving three concepts of border, hospitality and the figure. After operationalization, the model was mounted in MAXQDA 2020 software. All words, phrases and sentences qualifying as the subcategories of translation condition were coded through close reading. Next, the frequency of each subcategory was extracted to clarify the prevalence of each category along with differences between author groups. The results established the concept of border as the most outstanding translation condition. Furthermore, the authors who left Iran as children/teenagers had the highest references to translation condition. The findings also showed that Iranian diasporic literature could serve as a translational survival strategy for Persian language, culture and identity.

Keywords: Border, Figure, Hospitality, Immigrants, Iranian diasporic literature, Translation condition

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10. This paper was received on 01.11.2025 and approved on 17.01.2026.

11. Corresponding Author: Ph.D. Holder, Department of English Language and Literature, Do. C., Islamic Azad University, Doroud, Iran; email: mahtabhosseini@iau.ac.ir

12. Associate Professor, Department of English Translation Studies, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran; email: mir-s.mousavi@atu.ac.ir

1. Background of the Study

In recent decades, relationships were found between migration and translation, by translation not including just translation proper, but multiple transformations immigrants undergo personally. A rich body of literature already recognized translation as a human experience derived from movement, displacement, and negotiation including Bhabha (1994), Cronin (2006), Simon (2012), Bielsa (2016), Inghilleri (2017), and Nergaard (2021). Many authors write in the language they adopt after migration. Meanwhile, some scholars hold that writing in a non-native language is an act of translation including Hron (2009), (Nannavecchia, 2017), and Lahiri (2022). In *Translating Myself and Others*, Lahiri talked about the challenges of thinking in Bengali and writing in English. In her opinion, "becoming a writer in English meant becoming a translator as well" (Lahiri, 2022, p. 10).

In this broader sense, translation might have textual representation in the literature penned by immigrants. Here, the basic question was whether the literature authored by Iranian immigrants represented translation as lived experience. Although some previous studies examined diasporic literature from a textual perspective (Parham, 2010), or postcolonial narratology (Tafreshi Motlagh, 2010), the way this sub-genre might illustrate transformations in thought and (self-) perception of immigrants was not clearly examined.

Many studies already framed diasporic literature among forms of translation, not merely between languages but across cultures, identities, and social norms. Some studies discussed the translational aspects of diasporic literature under the concept of hybridity. Literature by diasporic authors was categorized among hybrid texts exhibiting elements from the original language and culture and acting as "fertile grounds out of which hybrid forms are to grow" (Mollanazar & Parham, 2009, p. 30). This viewpoint emphasized the way diasporic texts could enrich the linguistic and cultural repertoire of the hosting countries; however, it overlooked the transformations in self-perception of authors leading to producing hybrid texts.

As a step forward, some other scholars followed postcolonial thought and examined diasporic literature in the light of 'cultural translation'. Safrastyan (2019) talked about the figurative translation of "newly arriving immigrants […] into citizens of the host country" (Safrastyan, 2019, p. 182). She concluded that Iranian diasporic authors acted as "cultural translators" who "translate their own culture as well as the pain of immigration in the context of their own sociocultural experience" (Safrastyan, 2019, p. 182) This was in line with Fotouhi who commented that diasporic literature

was filled with "intertextual allusions across cultural traditions" (Fotouhi, 2010, p. 81). Yet another study verified that diasporic author "moves in the direction of cultural translation by claiming a space for heterogeneity and promoting the original culture." (Hosseini & Mousavi Razavi, 2024, p. 90).

What was said above confirmed Hron (2009) who believed that immigrants had to "transform their images of home, their idealized notions of the new country, their former values, customs, and, above all their culture into the context of the target of the host country" (Hron, 2009, p. xvi). She generalized translation to the fiction written by immigrants by commenting that diasporic authors "translate their experiences of immigration into narratives" (Hron, 2009, p. xvii.) To her, diasporic literature was the "inter-semiotic" translation of immigration experience. (Hron, 2009, p. 3). In a similar line, Karimzadeh (2020) stated that Iranian diasporic authors were translated into diasporic subjects. He used the concept of cultural palimpsest as a metaphor to narrate their translation. He asserted that "diasporic authors resort to cultural translation, leading to the emergence of cultural palimpsests and the production of accented literature" [my translation] (Karimzadeh, 2020, p. 111).

Following Safrastyan and Hron, to Gjurcinova writing in an adopted language equaled "getting engaged in translation and self-translation" (Gjurcinova, 2013, p. 1) since it necessitated thinking in one language but writing in another. Kosowski (1996) verified this by declaring that "the process of writing in the other language is first of all a translation of the culture, but also of a new self. It is a very specific translation that occurs within the person's psyche" (Kosowski, 1996, p. 28). This was confirmed by Nergaard who proposed that "migrant literature was without any doubt a privileged space for exploring self-translation" (Nergaard, 2021, p. 131).

Although more recent studies made references to translation as a personal experience, less known was the way in which translation as lived experience might be textually represented in Iranian diasporic literature. This study tried to fill the gap in the existing literature. The study sought to discover which issue of translation condition (border, hospitality, and figure) was most prominently represented in Iranian diasporic literature. Another question was whether different groups of authors were different in representing translation as experience.

3. Methodology

This was a corpus-based, quasi-quantitative study. Methodically, it was descriptive since it described the ways translation as a human experience was

represented in Iranian diasporic literature. To examine translation in its broader sense, concepts were integrated in a model. The model was then operationalized to reduce the gap between abstract and concrete terms. Data was then collected using MAXQDA 2020 software.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The basic concept framing the analysis included *translation condition*, by Nergaard (2021) who asserted that "the migrant lives in a condition of translation" (Nergaard, 2021, p. 2). She defined three issues of 'border', 'hospitality' and 'figure' as the conditions requiring immigrants to experience translation figuratively. The basic idea is that since immigrants face multiple borders, receive different degrees of hospitality' and are 'figured' differently in different sociopolitical contexts, they experience translation as a requirement for integration in the hosting communities. Each category was further divided according to the details provided by Nergaard (2021) to develop the model applied for data collection.

3.2. Corpus

To find textual representations of translation as experience, a corpus of Iranian diasporic literature in English was selected. To narrow down the scope, only the genres of novel, short story, and memoir were included. For authors, the selection criterion was lived experience in Iran and in North America. Three groups were recognized: those who left Iran as adults, those who left Iran as children or teenagers, and the descendants of Iranian immigrants. Although the last group had no lived experience as migrants or as Iranian nationals, they were recognized with diaspora because of family line. Authors were selected whose works were translated into many languages or won literary prizes. Five books from each group were included, which together comprised a corpus large and reliable enough to answer the study questions.

Table 1. Books by the First Group of Authors

Title	Author	Year published	Language	Publisher
The Street of Butterflies	Mehri Yalfani	2017	English	Inanna Publications (Canada)
Mirage	Nahid Rachlin	2024	English	Red Hen Press (California)
The Immortals of Tehran	Ali Taheri Araghi	2020	English	Melville House (NY)

Against Gravity	Farnoosh Moshiri	2006	English	Penguin Books (London & NY)
Rooftops of Tehran	Mahbod Seraji	2009	English	Berkley (NY)

Table 2. Books by the Second Group of Authors

Title	Author	Year published	Language	Publisher
It Ain't so Awful, Falafel	Firoozeh Jazayeri Dumas	2016	English	Clarion Books (NY)
Sons and Other Flammable Objects	Porochista Khakpour	2007	English	Grove Press (NY)
A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea	Dina Nayeri	2013	English	Riverhead Books (NY)
The Stationery Shop of Tehran	Marjan Kamali	2019	English	Simon Schuster (NY)
The Girl from Garden	Parnaz Foroutan	2015	English	HarperCollins (NY)

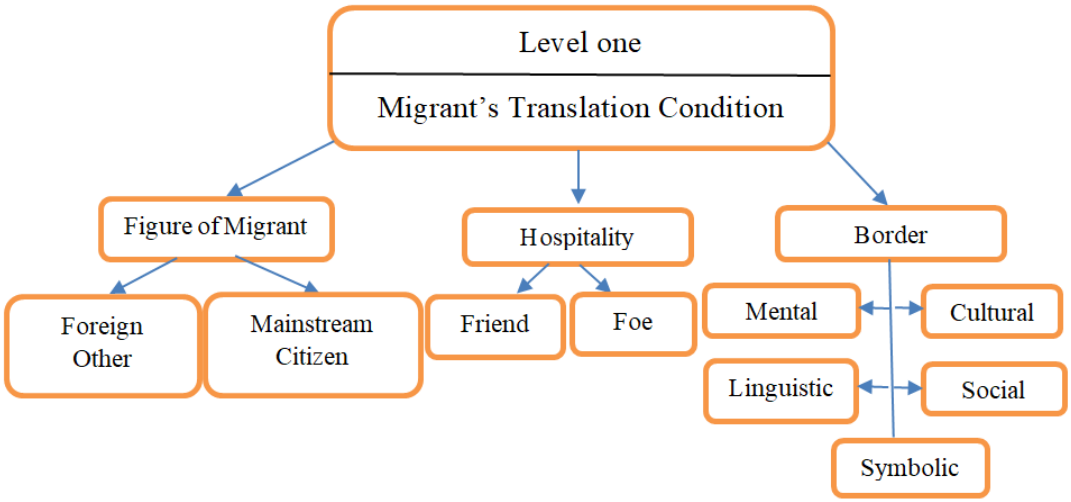
Table 3. Books by the Third Group of Authors

Title	Author	Year published	Language	Publisher
The Fortune Catcher	Sussane Pari	1997	English	Grand Central Pub (NY)
Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran	Azadeh Moaveni	2005	English	Public Affairs (NY)
Call me Zebra	Azareen Oloomi	2016	English	Mariner Books (Boston)
Darius the Great Is Not Okay	Adib Khorram	2018	English	Dial Press (NY)
You're Embarrassing Yourself	Desiree Akhavan	2024	English	Random House (NY)

3.3. Data Collection

To collect data, a model was developed by further categorizing the three concepts of border, hospitality and figure suggested by Nergaard (Migrant's Translation Condition). Each concept was expanded according to Nergaard to include detailed categorizations that could be defined and operationalized in order to become identifiable through close reading. The model was mounted in MAXQDA 2020 software, with all subcategories in the code system. Each subcategory was characterized with a color. The corpus was stored in documents section. Each book was closely read and each segment (word/phrase/sentence) that qualified under a subcategory was coded by the researcher. The coded segments were in color and the number of codes was inserted against each category. Accordingly, data included all words, phrases and sentences that were coded under the categories of the model. For example, if a migrant was feared of because of his appearance, this exemplified the subcategory of 'migrant as a foe' and was coded under the category of hospitality. Figure 1 represents the model applied for data collection.

Figure 1. Migrant's Translation Model



3.4. Operationalization of the Model

To turn abstract concepts into measurable elements, the model was operationalized:

Linguistic border is faced when "linguistic differences meet and negotiate" (Nergaard, 2021, p. 94). Throughout the corpus, all examples of lexical, grammatical and accentual problems in using English correctly and fluently were counted as facing

linguistic border. Examples of code-switching, code-blending, calque, skewing, loan words and literal translation were also counted.

Symbolic border is "an invisible border" faced when people are "excluded from social groups due to differences" (Nergaard, 2021, p. 92). On this basis, all examples in which Iranian immigrants were excluded from membership in groups due to religious/national identity, economic/social class, ethnic/racial differences, and bodily characteristics were counted.

Cultural border is faced when references were made to boundaries separating "distinct cultures with shared features" (Nergaard, 2021, p. 91). Accordingly, all references to customs and traditions, food customs, humor, politeness, religious practices, superstition, folklore and attitudes toward family structure, native idioms/proverbs, national celebrations/holidays, wedding ceremonies, funeral rituals, Persian cuisine, shamefulness, respect for elders, patriarchy and misogyny, patience, hospitality, fatalism, patriotism and valuing people's talk were counted.

Mental border is faced when immigrants "encounter psychological challenges" caused by the experience of migration (Nergaard, 2021, p. 93). Thus, any references to conflicting identities, belonging, mental withdrawal such as isolation, alienation, loneliness, detachment and psychological problems including anxiety, depression, etc. were included.

Migrant as a friend refers to situations of "accepting the foreign other as she comes with her difference" (Nergaard, 2021, p. 70), thus all instances depicting friendship, mutual understanding, acceptance and empathy between immigrants and non-migrants were included.

Migrant as a foe refers to the time when immigrant is "intrinsically linked to threat" (Nergaard, 2021, p. 73). All instances in which immigrants were hated, unwanted, terrifying and untrustworthy were counted.

Migrant as mainstream citizen counts all instances in which "immigrants are as privileged as settled citizens" (Nergaard, 2021, p. 24). Accordingly, all references to the sense of belonging, engagement in local activities, and adopting mainstream practices were counted.

Migrant as foreign other counts all instances of treating immigrants as "secondary and even lacking" (Nergaard, 2021, p. 24) including any identification of immigrants as outsiders, with no sense of belonging, or denied of mainstream rights.

3.5. Data Analysis

To analyze data, descriptive statistics was used. After extraction from MAXQDA 2020 software, the frequency of each subcategory was recorded. First, the frequencies of textual segments depicting translation conditions were extracted and tabulated. Next, the frequency of translational strategies was calculated and contrasted for three groups of authors.

4. Findings

After coding process was complete, 6512 examples with translational value were identified. There were 6219 references to types of borders. Among them, 2436 examples of negotiating linguistic borders were identified including language accented either syntactically or semantically. Examples of non-standard grammar or syntactic errors were found as in "Kokab went where?" (Foroutan, 2015, p. 150). Accented language could also manifest through skewed spelling of words, as in "Are you shoor, no dinner, Doktor Davood?" (Jazayeri Dumas, 2016, p. 77). Literal translation of Persian grammatical structures could show accented syntax as in "Agha Darioush. You want faludeh?" Semantically accented language included combination of words that were grammatically correct, but did not signify meaning in English including colloquial expressions, idioms and proverbs in Persian such as "a big black eggplant under at least one eye" (Seraji, 2009, pp. 22-23), or "from chicken's milk to soul of man" (Nayeri, 2004, p. 16)

Similarly, linguistic border was negotiated when the authors used Persian words and expressions including the names of people and places, references to Iranian architecture, cuisine, personality traits, historical, literary and political figures, beliefs, customs and traditions, cultural items, etc. In words and expressions such as "taarof" (Seraji, 2009, p. 37), or "sofreh aghd" (Moshiri, 2006, p. 69) Persian lifestyle was observable. There were ample references to Iranian foods and drinks such as "ash-e reshteh" (Khorram, 2018, p. 82). There were references to miscellaneous cultural items, or to Iranian architecture as in "panj-daree" (Kamali, 2019, p. 113). References to words including "halal" (Moaveni, 2005, p. 36) showed the presence of religious concepts. Examples including "Eid-e shomaa mobarak" (Khorram, 2018, p. 137) reflected catchy phrases used in Iranian greeting.

In 1882 instances, the occurrence of symbolic border was reported recounting occasions in which Iranian immigrants were denied group membership due to identity differences resulting in translational decisions such as changing Persian names, as in

"I knew this was my chance to break the cycle of embarrassment. I decided to change my name." (Jazayeri Dumas, 2016, p. 19). Some migrants hid, skewed or even denounced their national identity not to face rejection as in "my overriding objective in meeting new people was to avoid mention of my Iranianness." (Moaveni, 2005, p. 21).

Cultural border encountered by immigrants included 1270 cases. Religious beliefs were expressed as in "Not since her ninth birthday had she been without her chador in front of men" (Pari, 1997, p. 31). Superstitious beliefs were reported as in "it is bad luck to cut fabric on a Tuesday" (Nayeri, 2013, p. 276). Cultural borders were amply faced in references to Iranian customs and traditions as in "Gilaki way of wrapping the fabric around her neck and tying it in back" (Nayeri, 2013, p. 74). Frequent references were made to national feasts such as Nowrooz, Yalda, and Sizdeh Bedar, along with traditions revolving around them as in "people cleaned up their houses from ceiling to floor" (Araghi, 2020, p. 247). Some referred to Iranian wedding ceremonies, as in "satin wedding cloth spread before us to bear candles and a mirror" (Pari, 1997, p. 7). Traditions associated with death and funerals were also amply recounted, including "Throughout the first year, the family members wear black and refrain from attending parties or celebrating the New Year" (Seraji, 2009, p. 135). In many instances, scenes, sounds, or smells were recounted evoking memories or experiences for Iranian people different from what non-Iranian readers might understand as in "A steaming samovar in one corner of the room" (Seraji, 2009, p. 231).

Next was mental border with 631 examples. It covered a wide range of mentally demanding struggles, including the sense of alienation, ambivalence, and a range of psychological disorders including anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, etc. Some instances portrayed the way immigrants felt divided between two irreconcilable halves, as in "I was there and I was not there. I was somewhere within myself" (Moshiri, 2006, p. 183). In another excerpt, the protagonist, manifested preoccupation with dreadful psychological conflict: "I didn't mention my dark thoughts—despair, dread of the un-known future, and the constant presence of death, real or imagined, in my dreams and wakefulness, madness at times." (Moshiri, 2006, p. 115). Mental borders were pushed differently when Iranian immigrants came to think of positive aspects of migration. For instance, a protagonist proclaimed "the awkward fusion of East and West in our American lives didn't necessarily point to our failure" (Moaveni, 2005, p. 18).

In 78 examples, Iranian immigrants faced a degree of hostility when they were avoided or called with rude names or titles, as in "When people asked me where I was from, I smiled tightly and said, "Iran." full stop. Shoulders pulled back. Defensive." (Moaveni, 2005, p. 41), or in: "Watch where you're aiming," Trent said, "Terrorist" (Khorram, 2018, p. 37). In another excerpt, the immigrant endured the hostile look of mainstream citizens: "A few of them looked at me with an odious glare, and when they eventually got up to leave, I felt the residue of their hostility" (Oloomi, 2016, p. 51). Despite the higher manifestation of hostility, 51 examples reported cordial, welcoming behavior towards immigrants. Instances were found when difference was celebrated, as in "they'd found my various accents "quirky" and endearing" (Akhavan, 2024, p. 9), or when feeling of sympathy was expressed as in "It's not just you, we're all refugees in a way" (Moshiri, 2006, p. 159).

Regarding the figure, immigrants faced the spectrum from being treated as insiders enjoying the same rights as mainstream people, to being marked as a foreigner. Although a native-born citizen could enjoy paramount integration, an immigrant might endure marginalization. Throughout the corpus, in 40 instances Iranian immigrants were figured as insiders. In these cases, despite differences in languages, religions and ethnicities, immigrants felt like non-migrants as in "it's not like there is a huge difference between me, Rachel, and Carolyn, even though we belong to three different religions. We are alike in so many more ways than we are different." (Jazayeri Dumas, 2016, p. 203); However, in 124 examples migrants felt, were described, addressed or treated as foreign other. Foreignization often manifested through deprivation from privileges: "and so these proud academics come to America and drive taxis" (Nayeri, 2013, p. 173). Sometimes the pressure of marginalization was so high that they felt doomed to failure, as in "Our future had been sealed off, we had been permanently barred from it, and we would never have access, not now, not ever, to Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" (Oloomi, 2016, p. 1).

Totally, among 6512 instances identified, 6219 instances included borders, 129 instances referred to the scale of hospitality and 164 examples reported on migrant's figure. The coded segments could be tabulated to show the frequency of their occurrence:

Table 4. The Frequency of each subcode in the code system

Code System	Frequency
Code System	
Migrant's Translation Condition	6512
Border	6219
Linguistic	2436
Symbolic	1882
Cultural	1270
Mental	631
Hospitality	129
as a Friend	51
as a foe	78
Figure of Migrant	164
Foreign Other	124
mainstream	40

As evident, the most frequent translation condition included the concept of border with a frequency of 6219 occurrences (95.51%).The second condition was the figure of the migrant with a frequency of 164 occurrrences (2.51%). The third and the last condition illustrated was the scale of hospitality with 129 occurrences (1.98%).

Table 5. Coded Segments per Document

Document System	#
Documents	6512
The Street of Butterflies	282
You are embarrasing yourself	147
Lipstick Jihad	463
Fortune Catcher	718
The girl from garden	467
stationery shop of Tehran	418
Immortals of Tehran	472
Mirage	397
Call me Zebra	116
A teaspoon of earth and sea	513
Sons and other flammable objects	312
It ain't so awful falafel	579
Darius the great is not okay	506
rooftops	885
against gravity	237

As the table suggested, *Rooftops of Tehran* (2009) by a first-group author had the highest number of coded segments (885), and *Call Me Zebra* (2017) by a third-group author had the least number (116). The documents could be contrasted as per the number of coded segments as represented in the following table:

Table 6. Coded Segments in three Groups of Documents

Group of Authors	Number of Codes
First Group	2099
Second Group	2328
Third Group	2085

As the table above suggested, the number of coded segments was pretty higher in books by the second groups of authors who left Iran as children or teenagers. Books by the first group of authors who left Iran as adults were the second in number of segments coded as conditions of translation. The books by the third group followed closely as the last group.

4.4. Discussion

The first question was concerned with the most frequently represented translation condition. According to tabulated data, border category was identified as the most frequent condition. This implied that migrants encountered borders in their migration trajectories requiring them to undergo transformations in linguistic, mental, cultural, and symbolic mindsets. Consequently, migrants were metaphorically translated into versions different from their pre-migration ones.

Among references to borders, 6219 references were made to linguistic border, which was the highest among border types. This showed that Iranian immigrants, first and foremost, faced linguistic barriers requiring them to negotiate their identities. Furthermore, the high number of Persian words/expressions in texts by Iranian immigrants could signify the preoccupation of authors with original language and culture. It could be concluded that Iranian diasporic literature was basically translational, through which dominant linguistic norms were resisted. It seemed to be a way for Iranian authors to practice agency and familiarize global readers with Iranian language and culture. Accordingly, negotiating linguistic borders was probably a translational capacity used to integrate the original language and to resist the authority of the dominant language.

Symbolic borders were the second most frequent ones. The denial of social integration acted as the force that drove immigrants towards translation into more socially acceptable people. They did so through translational alternatives including adopting foreign names, changing appearance, imitating native accent, avoiding Iranian foods, rituals, etc. Next were cultural borders.

Facing abundant cultural borders revealed insistence on sharing cultural repertoire while conforming to the expectations of the host culture. This demonstrated negotiation between cultural norms and consequently translation of cultural identities. Mental border was the last group with the lowest number of codes; however, this type of border had serious consequences in the lives of immigrants. Facing mental borders could characterize through unfulfilled expectations of desired life, feeling nostalgia or homesick or the hope to reunite with the motherland.

The second question dealt with the way three groups of authors differed in portraying translation condition. Tables 4, 5 and 6 illustrated that the second group represented the highest number of borders, hospitality issues and the figure of other. This group was followed by the first group, who seemingly had nearly the same number of encounters with the sub-codes. Documents by the third group, likewise, reported a number close to the first group.

5- Conclusion

The findings of this study verified Nergaard (2021) in that the life of immigrants was conditioned by translation. By manifesting her translation conditions as fluid concepts, the study showed that negotiating linguistic and cultural borders was closely related to social survival and mental health. Similarly, they confirmed Hron (2009) who asserted that immigrants redefined their identity through negotiation between cultures. Similarly, confronting mental borders could lead to a constant process of (self) translation. Immigrants might cross psychological borders in a negative way that could disturb the thinking, emotional wellbeing and behavior of immigrants. However, there could be a positive aspect to facing mental borders in the identity-shattering experience of migration. They could provide the opportunity to enjoy a vantage point to both home/host lands. This was in line with Karimzadeh (2020) who believed that immigrants were endowed with double-consciousness due to migration.

Furthermore, the findings revealed how the experience of marginalization could force immigrants to turn to translation as a tool for survival and adaptation in

an unwelcoming milieu. Similarly, it was found that hostile encounters were mainly resulted by cultural misunderstandings and prejudices. As the findings showed, Iranian immigrants received hostility due to original nationality, Middle Eastern look, political issues and religious prejudices. Consequently, it could be concluded that Iranian immigrants were forced to undergo translation constantly to reach a higher place on the scale of hospitality. In case of hospitable behavior, however, immigrants felt less urgent to translate themselves. Similarly, for immigrants as privileged as mainstream inhabitants, translation seemed unnecessary to obtain a degree of inclusion, vice versa.

Fewer codes in the first group could be justified by the fact that many first-group immigrants refused to negotiate with hosting communities, mainly due to linguistic problems or cultural differences, or in the hope to return to the homeland very soon; consequently, translation conditions were largely avoided. However, the second group had to socialize; thus, they encountered borders, hospitality issues and foreignization. They had to translate themselves accordingly. The same was true regarding the third group. Since they enjoyed mastery in English and higher familiarity with the hosting culture, they encountered less translation conditions.

The findings were in line with some of the latest theoretical developments conceptualizing translation as a human experience derived from migration. Thus, it could be concluded that diasporic literature may serve as a translational survival strategy for Persian language, culture and identity. Similarly, it was revealed how translation, in the context of Iranian diasporic literature became an act of self-positioning within the hosting culture. Diasporic authors, in this sense, acted as both authors and translators.

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