

**"POLYSYSTEM
TRANSLATION THEORY"
RE-EVALUATION**

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This study aims at discussing one of the recent translation theories which is called Polysystem theory. It has dominated the Anglo-American literary scene during the seventies and eighties of this century.

It has its impact on many studies related to the field of translation. The pioneer of this theory is a professor at Tel Aviv University; Itamar Even-Zohar. But the theory has developed by his disciple Gideon Toury. Toury's initial field study was built up within the scope of a large project called "the history of literary translation Hebrew" being undertaken at the university of Tel Aviv at the time (1980)".

(Gentzler, 1993, p.125).

According to this theory, the act of translation is one-sided. In other words the main concern of any translated work is the T.L.T. reader, neglecting the faithfulness of the S.L.T. It also neglects the common concept of other translation theories which depends on one of the linguistic or literary approaches. It focuses its interest on the cultural approach of T.L.T. Therefore this study doesn't aim only at presenting and analyzing the

Polysystem translation theory, but it aims at re-evaluating the items of the theory and criticizing its different bases to discover its ideological background. Then, the methods of this study are summed up in the following items:-

- to analyze the historical, socio-economic aspects of the polysystem translation theory.
- to discuss Even-Zohar's contribution.
- to discuss Toury's contribution.
- to criticize and re-evaluate the bases of this theory to know its real tendencies.

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In his book *Contemporary Translation Theories*, Gentzler tries to trace the development of translation studies. But he tries -also- to know why these two Israeli scholars adopted this Polysystem translation theory and at that time in particular. He asks "*why did this union in work going on by scholars in the low countries and in Israel occur at this moment in time?*" (Gentzler, 1993, p.106)

Gentzler tries to answer the question:-

"One reason certainly had to do with the parallel development in their social and historical situation....., while the Israelis interested with German, Russian, and later Anglo-American scholars. A similar perspective on translation also existed in both regions: their countries might be characterized as having few people speaking in "minor" languages, both "national" literatures are very much influenced by "major" literatures around them". (Gentzler, 1993, p.106).

This is not the only reason for adopting Polysystem theory, but Israel as a nation is "a young" country which

lacks a national literature. It is in its first step to make a national literature. Gentzler adds:

"This situation in Israel was more extreme than in the low countries....., for Hebrew lacked a canon of literary works and was totally dependent upon foreign languages texts to provide both diversity and depth. More importantly, however, was the dependence of the culture as a whole upon translation for commercial and political purposes". (Gentzler, 1993, p.106).

In their making a nation, the Israelis depended completely on translation, "the Israeli scholars found themselves at crossroads not only between the Soviet Union and the West, but between The Middle East and "Third world cultures". (Gentzler, 1993, p.106).

Another reason may be added that Israel as a nation lacking great literary tradition, found itself -suddenly- among Arab countries with great literary tradition in the past as well as the present. Gentzler refers to this reason indirectly when he says :

"..... Paul Engle asserted that the future of the world may depend upon the accurate translation of one word :

Nowhere is this assertion more apparent in fragile diplomatic and political situations in the Middle East. There Russian culture does meet Anglo-American; Moslem meets Jewish,

(Gentzler , 1993, p.107).

For these reasons, it will be suitable for the Israeli scholars to develop Translation Studies of Lefevere and Vanden Broech, on one hand, and the Russian formalists on the other, and in particular Jury TynJanov. These studies opened the doors for the Israelis to choose one of these approaches of translation studies to fill the gap in their culture and tradition. But they were conscious of the kind of S.L.T. they choose to translate. Toury himself discovers that the movement of translation into Hebrew during the period of the seventies, depended on ideological reasons. The type

of subjects and of writers chosen to be translated into Hebrew, are important in this respect.

Gentzler comments on this choice by the word “ironically” because this information is given to us by the Israeli Toury himself. Gentzler says :

“Ironically, according to Toury’s field study, linguistics and aesthetics played a very small role in the translation process; in fact, Toury found that most texts were selected for Ideological reasons. Preferences for social and even “socialist” works, for certain subjects and topics, and of course for Jewish writers and subjects were dominated.” (Gentzler, 1993, p.126).

It is clear, here, that the Israeli professors had Ideological reasons to direct the public opinion of the Jewish readers. They aim at giving translation studies a political color. On the other hand, one may add that this theory should produce a kind of “didactic” translation. Even-Zohar, the leader and pioneer of this theory defines three social circumstances “enabling a situation in which translation would maintain a primary position, when a literature is a “young”. (Even-Zohar, 1978, p. 243) as is characteristic of the Israeli situation”. (Gentzler, 1993, p.114).

Zohar asserted the need of Israel as a “young” nation, for translation process, Gentzler agrees that :

“Translation fulfills the need of its new language for as many different kinds of writing as possible since it can not create all forms and genres, translated texts..... may serve as the most important for a certain amount of time”. (Gentzler, 1993, p.117).

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First of all, one should classify the pioneer of the Polysystem translation theory, the Israeli Itamar Even-Zohar as a cultural theorist rather than a translation one. His

concern is to serve and support his own nation; Israel and T.L.T. readers, but not to add a pure aspect to the field of translation theories.

What is the meaning or "significance" of the term "Polysystem" translation ?

Gentzler answers saying :

"..... he coins the term "Polysystem" to refer to the entire network of correlated systems-literary and extra literary - within society,"

His aim of this is: to develop "an approach called Polysystem theory to attempt to explain the function of all kinds of writing within a given culture." (Gentzler, 1993, p.114)

The analysis of the term is simply that the translation process is one-sided, but different methods. It doesn't depend on either linguistics or literary approaches as usual, but rather it must depend on the different cultural situations of the society in a given time. It does mean that the translator must put in his consideration the socio-economical political affairs of the T.L. culture. These affairs are very important in translation process, so the important difference between the preceding translation theorists, and Polysystem theorists, is that, the non-Polysystem theorists:

"believed in the subjective ability of the translator to derive an equivalent text that in turn influenced the literary and cultural conventions in a particular society". (Gentzler, 1993, p.107).

Those theorists believe in the subjectivity of the translator and his ability and liberty as well, but :

"Polysystem theorists presume the opposite : that the social norms and literary conventions in the receiving presuppositions of the ("target" system) govern the aesthetic presuppositions of the

translator and thus influence ensuing translation decisions". (Gentzler, 1993, p.107).

Polysystem theory aims at giving certain information to the T.L.T. reader. Therefore, Even-Zohar interested in the cultural affairs of the T.L.T. and the necessity of giving them more considerations, for the situation itself is not important, but it is just a means to another end which directs the T.L. readers. He assures "the necessity of the assumption of the difference between S.L. and T.L." (Gentzler, 1993, p.144).

The idea of Polysystem translation itself is not the invention of Even-Zohar but it was used by the Russian Formalists and Juri Tynjanov in particular, then it was imitated by Even-Zohar. But Even-Zohar developed this theory to be in conformity with his ideological interests. Consequently Even-Zohar asserted the importance of the role of the translator to change the S.L.T. to be in conformity with the T.L. culture. This study comes to the kernel point of Polysystem theory which called for "change, or selection or difference or replacement" or the relation between S.L. and T.L. according to Even-Zohar's theory.

"... Even-Zohar "next" explores the relationship between the translated texts and the Polysystem along two lines : (1) how texts to be translated are selected by receiving culture, and (2) how translated texts adopt certain norms and functions as a result of language systems".

(Gentzler, 1993, p.118).

At first, Even-Zohar calls for the importance of change, then he gives the substitute, either equivalence or replacement, as he prefers the selection of the texts to be translated. The philosophy of selection according to Even-Zohar serves his purposes of Hebrew or Israeli receiving passive society and culture, because his theory (and also

Toury after him) focuses on one-sided translation into Hebrew and not from Hebrew.

“selection according to Even-Zohar’s research, appears to be governed by conditions within the receiving Polysystem. Texts to be translated are chosen because of their compatibility with the new forms needed by a Polysystem to achieve a complete, dynamic, homogeneous identity. Thus, the Socio-literary conditions of receiving culture in part determine those texts which got translated in the first place. (Gentzler, 1993, p.118).

If one considers the process of “selection” as less dangerous, the process of “change or replacement” in a translated text is more dangerous. This point is developed by another Polysystem theorist; Toury who is considered a disciple of Even-Zohar.

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Toury comes to revise and evaluate the contribution of his teacher Even-Zohar. But he begins to focus his concern on more practical interests and to give more accurate views concerning the role of “change elevation or replacement ” in translation. Toury discusses this point as follows:-

“..... more changes were noted with regard to word “choices” and “style”, resulting in the discovery of textual norms such as a tendency to “elevate” the text by choosing words to reflect

(Gentzler, 1993, p.126)

Speaking about “replacement”, Toury never changes the views of Even-Zohar. Both agree that “replacement” is important to have a good T.L.T. which represents the purpose of the Polysystem theorists. Toury asserts that :-

"..... the actual relationship between a source text and target text may or may not reflect the postulated abstract relationship; nevertheless, the translated text exists as a cultural artifact for the replacement of a source text by an acceptable version in the receiving culture". (Gentzler, 1993, p.128).

The aim of this translation theory is only the receiving culture and what data and information the T.L. may give to the readers, neglecting what S.L. may give to the readers. The role of the translator here must be different from the first conception. Now according to Even-Zohar and Toury the translator becomes the writer of a new text not the original, but the translated one. "Replacement" means, the receiving culture will receive all the time a new text which is compatible with it and is different from S.L.T. Gentzler comments saying:-

"..... As opposed to another source text (S.T.) determined theory, Toury posits a target text (T.T.) theory for translation, focusing not on some notion of equivalence as postulated requirements, but on the "actual relationships" constructed between ce text and its "factual replacement".

(Gentzler, 1993, p. 129).

This is the kernel point of the Polysystem translation theory, but it was employed earlier, by some translation theorists; Newmark and Lefevere. In discussing the techniques of translating the metaphor (in literary translation) Newmark refers to this device of replacement saying:-

"..... The translator may replace the image in the S.L. with a standard T.L. image which doesn't clash with the T.L. culture, but which, like most stock metaphors, proverbs, etc., are presumably

(Peter Newmark, 1986, p. 89).

One notes the same view of Polysystem theory which gives its interest to the receiving culture when "replacement" is used. Then it is T.L. not S.L. which is

more important. This view was repeated also by Lefevere, when he discussed the translation of allusion and metaphor. But the statement of Lefevere is more direct and dangerous, it is the one which Polysystem theorists mean. Lefevere gives the translator(s) the freedom either to translate the allusion, to omit or to replace it. He gives the translator(s) a chance to evaluate the allusion and its capability with the T.L.T. He says:-

“..... If they consider that an allusion in the original no longer enhances the writer’s point they may decide to replace it with another kind of allusion. If they are translating into a language that doesn’t share a culture with the source language, they have to decide whether to introduce the allusion (and possibly explain it at some length in a footnote) to omit “or to replace it by an allusion endemic to their own culture and analogous to the allusion found in the original.” (Lefevere, 1992, p 146).

One disagrees with Lefevere’s conception of replacement, because it may lead to change the S.L.T. Lefevere preceded, and prepared the scene for the Polysystem theory.

The methodology of Toury can be summed up in the following questions:-

“..... What is the translation “policy” of the target culture? what is the difference between translation, imitation, and adaptation for the specific period ? What authors, periods genres, schools are preferred by the target culture”. (Gentzler, 1993, p. 130).

These questions arise from a utilitarian approach of translation which must serve the T.T. according to Even-Zohar and Toury. Therefore there is a lack of what is called faithfulness of T.L.T. in comparison with S.L.T.

“.....The reason for this general lack of concern for “faithfulness” to source text, Toury concluded, was not that the translators were indifferent to the textual relations within the source

text but that their goal was to achieve acceptable translations in the target culture". (Gentzler, 1993, p. 127)

The Polysystem theorists don't care with faithfulness of the T.L.T., but they want to make S.L.T., as if it were written by their own translators to be the "wanted T.L.T.", whatever the S.L.T. is .

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After presenting Polysystem translation theory , it is clear -now- the weak and faulty items of that theory. Gentzler -himself- criticizes the theory saying:-

"Even-Zohar's formulation of principles occasionally

(Gentzler, 1993, p. 124).

As he refers to other mistakes of the theory through three pages of his book (p. 122-124).

If one considers the pioneers of this theory as just Israeli theorists who theorize to support their own literature, then there will be no problem at all. But they presented a universal theory, and they really, have some impact on the movement of translation studies, Gentzler refers to Even-Zohar's work as "perhaps the most important to date in the field of translation theory.....His work is highly innovative".

(Gentzler, 1995, p. 121).

The first fault, one finds in this theory, is that it lacks the objectivity of a theory. Any theory must be objective. Translation, in general, depends on two equal sides S.L.T. and T.L.T., the Israeli theorists want to neglect S.L.T. depend on T.L.T only.

The question is: What is about the original text? or What is about the original writer of the source text? When the translator gives himself the right to change the S.L.T, now he is the writer himself and not a translator. It means that we have different T.L.T (s) of one S.L.T., by the difference of translators and the difference of the times of translation.

This is not translation at all. Toury himself, discovered this fact, when he made a survey of the translated works into Hebrew during the seventies. Therefore, he describes such translation as "an active, directive and normative". (Gentzler, 1993, p. 127)

"Van Den Broeck begins his essay "the concept of Equivalence in translation theory" in arrangement with Holmes,He even quotes Holmes' experiment yielding twenty-five renderings of the same text". (Gentzler, 1993, p. 96)

This is the experience of the preceding theorists who adopted the device of equivalence for a time, but when they discovered its bad side, they declared that "we must by all means reject the idea that equivalence relation applies to translation". (Gentzler, 1993, p. 96).

The Polysystem theorists aim at choosing certain texts and information for their Israeli people then the translation process must surrender to the kind of reader: T.L.T. should also be changed to be suitable to the T.L.T readers. The question now is about the classical works which may have allusions or information unsuitable to T.L.T. readers. How can Polysystem translators deal with? One may refer to the play of Shakespeare *The Merchant Of Venice*, how could the Polysystem theorists and translators deal with? If they could change some conversations, could they change the character of Shylock? Could they make him a Christian or Moslem instead of being a Jew? if they do it, then it will be no more the play of Shakespeare in

addition to this the Polysystem translators should ask about the identity of their readers to make the T.L.T. suitable to them. One believes that the translated text must be read as it is, in S.L.T. with all its thoughts, techniques, attitudes, its political and social background. Savory asserts in his book *The Art of Translation* that: "A translation must give the words of the original, a translation must give the ideas of the original". (Savory, 1968, p. 54). It is important to feel that the translated text is born legally with the spirit of its author; age and thoughts. It is difficult to imagine, Eliot or Dickens (when their works translated into Arabic) draw an Arabian scene, depict Moslem characters and deal with Arabic mythology of folk tales.

The second item which is very dangerous is the use of "change, omission, elevation or replacement".

It is important to find rhetorical devices in literary translation such as: metaphor, allusion and others. But to omit this rhetorical device or replace it with another one, to be compatible with the receiving culture, is wrong. Here one believes again that this replacement should change the S.L.T. and give a new one, then the translator lacks his role and becomes a new one (i.e. the original writer).

To illustrate this idea of replacement, according to Lefevere, Newmark, Even-Zohar and Toury. One may refer to a part of *The Burda*, which was composed by the Sufi poet Al-Busiri and the translation of Thoraya Mahdi Allam:-

جاءت لدعوته الأشجار ساجدة

تمشى إليه على ساق بلا قدم

كأنما سطرت سطرًا لما كتبت

فروعها من بديع الخط بالقلم

مثل الغمامة أنى سار سائدة

تقيه حر وطيس للهجير حمى

أقسمت بالقمر المنشق إن له

من قلبه نسبه مبرورة القسم

و ما جوى الغار من خير و من كرم

وكل طرف من الكفار عنه عمى

فالصدق في الغار والصدق لم ير ما

وهم يقولون ما بالغار من أرم

ظنوا الحمام وظنوا العنكبوت على

خير البشرية لم تنسج ولم تحم

وقاية الله أغنت عن مضاعفة

من الدروع وعن عال من الأطم

(Allam, 1987, p. 87-89).

What kind of replacement one can use in these lines? They are full of religious allusions concerning miracles of the Prophet Mohammed it is wrong to replace them with any of allusions of English source.

The translation of Thorya Mahdi Allam is:

**The trees came to him at his summons,
obeisance to pay.**

**They walked towards him on their trunks
with no feet on their way.**

**As if a line they made for
what would have by branches been**

**In finest of handwriting written.
by a pen it seems.**

**Like the cloud's miracle which followed
him whence he did go,**

**Protecting him from midday heat,
which blazed an oven's glow.**

**Oh by God the moon, which was split
by him, I do swear,**

**Mohammed such a heart has
and its brightness is as fair**

**As of the moon, my oath is justified,
this I declared.**

I swear too by the sanctity
that this cave did contain,
Of goodness of the prophet,
and the charity humane
Of Abu Bakr, whilst infidels
blinded to them became.
The true one and the trusting one
this cave they did not leave,
Whilst unbelievers started that
no one was in the cave.
They did not realise that both
the spiders and the doves,
Round finest of mankind had spun
their webs and perched above.
And thus through God's protection,
he was able to dispense
With double coat of mail, and
a high fortress of defense.

(Allam, 1987, pp. 87-89).

She translates the allusions without change or replacement, she was obliged to interpret some allusions, to make the reading easy, not to direct the receiving reader.

According to Polysystem theorists it is important to replace the miracles of the Prophet Mohammed with other miracles of the English tradition to be suitable to the receiving culture and the receiving reader! This is not a scientific approach nor theory at all. Therefore the great translation theorists of Anglo-American scene reject this theory, Gentzler concludes saying :-

“Translation scholars in England and America like Bassnett, Lefevere (who moved to America in the early eighties), David Lloyd, and Maria Tymoczko seem to be distancing themselves even further from Even-Zohar’s Polysystem models, which they find too formalistic and restrictive”. (Gentzler, 1993, p.139).

One may conclude that this Polysystem translation theory, is rather a T.L.T translation one. It depends on the selection and replacement to direct the receiving society (T.L.T. readers).

This proves that T.L.T. theory expresses a weak culture which can’t face other cultures directly (through translated texts), it fears of the impact of others (other cultures), because it is not strong enough to lead its readers to read S..L.T. as it is written. One believes that this theory is not the ideal one to be followed.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>S.L.</i>	<i>Source Language</i>
<i>T.L.</i>	<i>Target Language</i>
<i>S.L.T.</i>	<i>Source Language Text</i>
<i>T.L.T.</i>	<i>Target Language Text</i>

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