

A Place in Memory Spatial Features in the House on Arnus Square

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Abstract

In the present paper we provide with an analysis of the spatial features within the narrative framework of the novel *The House on Arnus Square* (Samar Attar 1998), the English version of an Arabic original published ten years earlier entitled *al-Bayt fī Sabat 'Arnus*. Our research is mainly focused on the representations that spatial elements carry out in the text in a diachronic way, with the purpose of exploring the limits between the objective and subjective levels combined by the author through personal reflections, the referents of which are in relation not only with historical realities but also with interferences coming from her own personal experience. In order to develop this goal, we have paid attention to two different terms quite characteristic and significant for the author herself: the term *house* and the syntagma *Damascene house*.

Keywords: Samar Attar, English narrative, autobiography, self-translation, discourse, spatial elements.

Introduction

The autobiographical production of the Syrian female author Samar Attar is characterized, among other aspects, by the interesting retrospective usage made from a series of narrative elements present in her two autobiographical novels published up to now. The specific case we are dealing with is about the descriptive employment that the author accounts for the house, providing the title to the first novel of an autobiographical trilogy planned by the author. In this book, the house is not only an essential part for the family, it's displaying and its *leitmotiv* at the same time, but also the house itself plays a role of steady chronological re-adaptations in the historical familiar bosom. It is like a kind of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, that is to say, like a sort of historical portrayals with which the author subtly introduces a variety of intimate descriptive features, what undoubtedly constitutes the intra-story of her family, herself, her memory and her past, as a prolepsis element describing the horizon of a vital awaited future. The case of Samar Attar is of interest as she is one of those writers who have self-translated their own works from Arabic into English. However, this process of self-translation can be conceived as different visions, among which we can highlight that of re-writing or even re-creation. The self-translation techniques used by the author exhibit a new cultural relationship with another language, the English one, her second language, being away from the semantic structures and contents of her native Damascene Arabic language.

According to Robert Wechsler (1998:214-216), "among the author and the self-translator there is only a simple relationship of just facing the self-translation, so we can then think of the internal conflicts that the author-translator must suffer when carrying out this assignment". Related to this recreational activity it is the transference of cultural contents, as self-translation does not imply a task counteracting the link between language and nation and the ideology underlying it. Therefore, the polarity of both languages does not remain intact, as M. Blanchot (1990:82-86) observes: "translation is a sheer play of difference: it constantly makes allusion to difference, but by occasionally revealing and often accentuating it, translation becomes the very life of difference".

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In fact, translation is not only an intellectual and creative process by means of which a text written in a language is transferred into another language, but also an activity framed in a historical and cultural context, as two languages with their own cultures are involved in any translation process. In this peculiar case, the two systems (Arabic and English) possess some specificity regarding political or religious aspects too, as Jacquemond (1992:139-158) describes: "The influence of English on the Arabic language has become stronger throughout the Arab world due to the increasing American presence, while the efforts of Arab cultural elites to construct a common cultural market have been constantly frustrated by political divisions. Hence, the not so rare reader who has access to Arabic written production published all the way from Casablanca to Bagdad cannot feel that modern written Arabic, despite the fiction of one, unique language unchanged since Koranic revelation, is splitting into various sub-languages whose specificities are a result of both exogene (English or French) and endogene (the various dialects) influences".

The target language is inscribed in a determined culture and its cultural identities and values are implied in the translating process. The same process of production and reception is also directly affected by the fact that the author is also the translator. In Venuti's words (1998:67): "Translation wields enormous power in constructing representations of foreign cultures. The selection of foreign texts and the development of translation strategies can establish peculiar domestic canons for foreign literatures, canons that conform to domestic aesthetic values and therefore reveal exclusions and admissions, centers and peripheries that deviate from those current in the foreign language".

Starting from this situation, it is obvious that Attar's position as a translator is somehow unlikeable, as being aware of the fact that she must carry out some changes affecting the canon of the novel immersed in the English Western culture, and more specifically in the American context –a reality which can be observed in some passages from the translated novel. The stereotypes the author tends to generate in the target culture (anthropologic, ethnologic, social and even religious, among others) create a structural framework of fixed ideas. As it is well-known, any translation leaves vestiges, what is called by Venuti a *domestic remainder*, that is to say, the cultural distance existing between the two languages. The process of 'domestication' entails the unavoidable challenge to the originality of the source text, as the approach to the target culture supposes at the same time a distancing from the original culture. Venuti explains this with lively interest (1998:31):

"Instead of enabling the true and disinterested understanding of the foreign text, translation provokes the fear of error, amateurism, opportunism –an abusive exploitation of originality. And insofar as the translator focuses on the linguistic and cultural constituents of the foreign text, translation provokes the fear that authorial intention cannot possibly control their meaning and social functioning". Taking into account the aforementioned, we are going to focus on the spatial representations of the novel within the narrative framework, mainly paying particular attention to the feelings that the house as a building evokes on the author-translator, not only in relation to historical facts but also to her personal experiences, as we will see below. For carrying out this, we are going to concentrate mainly on two important terms: on the word *house* and on the syntagma *my Damascene house*.

2. The term *House*

By means of description, it is made evident the perception that the author possesses of reality through her senses. This perception can be oriented towards the product, the process or even the function. Therefore, the cognitive procedure carried out corresponds to situations located at a fiction or non-fiction space. However, in this second case, all the non-fictional references are coherent with the world, expressing occurrences and changes in the space. For Attar, the nature and significance of the house as a place is a complex but unitary structure that encompasses the self and the other, space and time, subjectivity and objectivity (López Pérez: 2014:27).

The description in the novel is inherently joined to the space and the characters taking part in it. The spatial description is carried out following an apparently narrative thread, integrated as a part of her cultural background. This includes, consequently, several comments, even from an ideological point of view, on the physical description of the house or of the urban space of Damascus. The formal characteristics of the setting also play an important role in the novel. In this descriptive composition of the house and of all its constituting elements, together with its urban crucial location in the heart of the historical Damascus, the building of the house symbolizes the city itself and its past, as well as the country of Syria. Therefore, the house is the story of the author's family; at times it is even a part of her own family, but in addition, it also represents that glorious past of the Greater Syria under the Damascus Umayyads.

That historical essential feature to project the glorious Syrian past, which is present in the author's vision, also connects with another historical link to which the author makes allusion deviously when referring to the patio of the house as an *Andalusian patio* (Andalusian garden). This syntagma was expressed in the original Arabic text *wa-ḥadiqatu-hu al-andalusiyyah* ('and its Andalusian garden'). With this, Attar obviously suggests another dimension from the Syrian past, that of the historical Umayyad extension, al-Andalus, an inherent and decisive part of Attar's intra-story.

That glorious past in its double synchrony (Eastern and Andalusian) is the symbolic framework evoked by the house in its historical narrative dimension. The author consciously expresses this dimension in her description. She wishes then to leave proof of a past that was, of a culture that changed, of a country that goes to nowhere, and of a past which is never going to come back. And the house is, therefore, its ultimate reflection. The first references about the term *house* appear from the very beginning of the novel, just in her preface. Attar is trying to establish the distinction between the terms *home* and *house*, comparing them with the Arabic term which better gathers the English sense, according to her own viewpoint. It seems as if the translation was not carried out from Arabic into English, but the other way around, that is to say, from English into Arabic.

She is constantly justifying why she has chosen the Arabic term *bayt* covering the sense of the word *home*. However, as we have stated previously, the first novel was written in Arabic with the title *al-Bayt fī Sābat 'Arnus*, whereas the English version appeared about ten years later and was translated as *The House on Arnus Square*, using the term *house* instead of the term *home*. The author explains the reasons why she used *bayt* starting from the English words *home* and *house*, as the Arabic term gathers everything she wants to express (Attar, 1998:1): "*Bayt* is an Arabic word lacking the psychological connotation of warmth, peace and happiness that the English term *home* provides". The Arabic term only makes reference to the rooms and the walls, or even to any place where one can spend the night, without mentioning any affective meaning nor psychological connotations, while the English term *home* expresses "the place to which one belongs and where one feels comfortable and happy", providing it with more specific connotations. On the contrary, the English word *house* is used to express "a building that is the ordinary dwelling-place of a family" (*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971:1339-1340) that is to say, the place where one lives, without specific attributions.

However, despite this distinction among the English dichotomy *home-house*, Attar has opted for the second term as the first one has got that familiar nuance she wants to get rid of and conveys feelings of happiness, comfort, peace and warmth that the house itself does not transmit to the author. Besides this, in the Arabic language, there are also four words which can be used to refer to this concept as they share similar connotations (Attar, 1998:1, 3-4): *bayt* (the dwelling made out of camel hair or mud, comprises only the rooms, the walls, or whenever one spends the night), *dār* (the place which includes the building, the square and the town), *maskan* (the house), *manzil* (the place where one stops or rests, the house). The author establishes that her choice has been based on the lack of psychological connotations, and goes even beyond when stating that the term *bayt* "has the connotation of a shelter" (Attar, 1998:3), as a prelude of what the house itself means or has meant to her. In fact, years later, when being written the novel, the author is still unable to express what the Damascene house entailed to her, as we can observe in the next passage (Attar, 1998:88):

"How difficult for me to say what my Damascene house had meant to me all these years. It wasn't the first floor where I was born, nor the second floor where I spent my childhood and my teens, nor the third floor where I established my play school and acted out all my crazy fantasies. It wasn't the building itself, the form, the content, the familiar things, the people, the square around it, the shops, the neighbors. Perhaps it was a mixture of all these things. I don't exactly know. But all I know now is that the glory of my old house had disappeared forever".

3. The syntagma *Damascene House*

For Attar, the fact of not having been able to spend her childhood in a genuine Damascene house represents a break with all the Syrian traditions, as the house itself is a symbol of the Syrian country. Just from the very beginning of the novel, Attar adopts a clear attitude towards the house: she wants to get away from the house, what undoubtedly means a wish of leaving her country aside, too. This dualism which is present along the whole novel implies a constant internal fight which will be solved partially when emigrating from Damascus. The next passage from the novel exemplifies this clearly (Attar, 1998:5):

"My Damascene house was not a large, old house with a branch of the river Barada crossing through it, nor did jasmine hang from its windows. Normally when one says damascene house, one immediately thinks of a house that opens out to two patios: the inner one with a gushing fountain and tall trees hugging from the windows of the second floor, and the outer one with a small river and Andalusia garden. No, my house was not Damascene in that sense. Undoubtedly, my parents had started the movement from the old city with its adjacent houses and narrow lanes to a new suburb surrounded by orchards. They built the first apartment house there without a garden. It seemed to me they were the first to change the features of Old Damascus and to spoil the most beautiful thing that they city had through the centuries".

From this description, one can imagine how a typical Damascene house looked like: the patios, the branch of the river and the Andalusian garden are significant characteristics of it. The word "patios" is a Spanish loan functioning as a trans cultural element in the translation, with which the author tries to express the Andalusian concept of a closed patio in the inner part of a house. The disposition of an Andalusian patio owes to a tradition dating back from Roman origins, where the rooms were faced to an inner patio held with columns. Traditionally, the Quran has many references to gardens, being used as an earthly analogue for life in the paradise promised to believers, as this English version of the verse 9.72 from the Quran shows: "Allah hath promised to Believers, men and women, gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein, and beautiful mansions in gardens of everlasting bliss. But the greatest bliss is the good pleasure of Allah: that is the supreme felicity".

A traditional garden is supposed to have water and it is intended for rest and contemplation. For this reason, these gardens usually include places for sitting. Therefore, since Attar's house had no Andalusian garden, one can understand that she could not live peacefully there, as her house did not represent a symbol for resting and having peace there anymore. Her new house was completely different to the traditional Damascene houses. Her new house lacked of the two patios so peculiar from traditional Arabic houses and was not built in the centre of Damascus city, but in the new suburbs, surrounded by orchards: nothing to do with the magnificent place where her family grew up and which represented the wealthy of her family. In fact, the deterioration of the house is clearly described in the next sentence (Attar, 1998:24): "[...] our Damascene house had become like an impoverished nobleman, its external and internal structure still bore the old aristocratic features".

However, despite the fact that she never got to know that Damascene house, she is always evoking it in her writings. The house represents the past, that is to say, the traditional Syria, symbolized through the city of Damascus. However, the house also represents everything she hates and everything she loves at the same time. As we have stated previously, even though she does not like her house, even though she does not want to live anymore there, she is not able to define what the house has meant to her and still means. She feels herself as a part of her house and, consequently, as a part of the country itself. What is more, this particular vision of the country goes beyond the house itself, when extrapolating it to all the members of her family. Attar, the main character of the novel, was the only child who was born in the modern apartment, another clear break with the city. As it can be seen in the next passage, the author is completely away from Damascus, just since the moment she was born (Attar, 1998:5-6):

"We were seven children. The first three were born in a genuine Damascene house within the gates of the old city, and three more were born in a house similar to the Damascene house, through the gates of the old city. I was the only child born in a modern apartment whose architecture was foreign to the traditional buildings of the city".

This text is extremely interesting due to the social nuances it provides. From the seven children, the first three were born in a genuine Damascene house, that it to say, they belonged to the genuine Syria, to the traditional Syria. Damascus represented the heart of the country. Therefore, they lived *within* the gates of the city, forming part of the city itself, and feeling as being inside the traditional Syria. The other three children were not born in a proper Damascene house but in a similar one. This represents that part of the Syrian society which does not totally agree with the conservative Syria and looks for another social level. That is the reason why they were born *through* the gates of the city, showing the transitional position they represent. And finally, the main character is the only one who was born outside the city walls, in a modern apartment, representing that new society with which the author wishes to break completely. According to the text, we could establish that her family was divided into three groups depending on the different social levels: the traditional one (the first three children), the middle level which is in favour of social changes (the other three children) and, finally, the modern social level, which is more progressive, wishing to undertake a change in the family.

Quite significant it is also the use of the prepositions on the part of the author. Whenever she makes reference to the first three children living in a genuine Damascene house, she uses the static preposition 'within', conferring the idea of interiority with the city of Damascus. However, when referring to the other three children, she uses the preposition 'through', a dynamic preposition conveying the sense of movement, of displacement, as it was what really happened to them.

Lastly, for the explanation of her own situation, she does not use any preposition, but the term 'foreign', meaning something you do not belong to, which is not your origin nor your country: the real feeling of the author and probably that of her father, as it can be guessed from the next passage (Attar, 1998:16): "But he couldn't, or perhaps, didn't want to, make our home Damascene like the one in which he was born".

4. Conclusion

As J.A. Malpas indicates (1999: 40), "place is a crucial notion with a structure which encompasses both subjective and objective". And, indeed, this is what happens to this Syrian author. With the analysis of the spatial term 'house' and its projection in the syntagma *my Damascene house*, we can check how the author develops this spatial element of the house within the narrative framework of the novel *The House on Arnus Square* in a diachronic way. Then, she combines personal reflections and their referents which are in relation not only to historical realities but also to interferences coming from her own personal experiences. Therefore, we can establish the following link between the house, the city of Damascus and the Syrian country. The different houses (the Damascene house and the apartment) represent the two Syrias: the traditional *versus* the modernist. But at the same time it reflects the three main social groups in which the members of the family are gathered: the traditionalist (the first three children born in the genuine Damascene house); another group which we can name as the transitional group, middle-positioned between tradition and modernism; and finally, the main character representing modernism and progression of the new Syria.

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