

Hybridity in Translation: The Case of *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*

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Abstract

This study examines hybridity in translation through a case study of *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America*. It analyzes how references to American and Iranian cultures are rendered in the Persian translation and how these choices shape the hybrid character of the text for different readerships. To this end, the English source text and its Persian translation are compared to identify the translation strategies applied to hybrid elements reflecting Iranian and American cultures. The findings show that material culture, such as food, clothing, housing, and transportation, constitutes the most prominent category of hybrid elements. Transference is the most frequently used strategy overall, particularly for elements reflecting American culture, indicating a predominantly foreignizing approach. In contrast, hybrid items reflecting Iranian culture are more often translated through cultural equivalence and reduction. Interpreted in light of Venuti's (1995) concepts of domestication and foreignization, the results suggest that the translator preserves the hybrid nature of the memoir by maintaining the foreignness of American elements while reducing familiar Iranian ones.

Keywords: Hybridity, memoir, cultural references, domestication, foreignization

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Introduction

The intricate relationship between language and culture, particularly as manifested in hybrid texts, forms the core of this study. This research investigates a memoir written by an Iranian author raised in America, focusing on the unique challenges posed by the hybrid elements as they are conveyed in English and subsequently translated into Persian. This research scrutinizes the translation strategies adopted by the translator, examining how they navigate the transfer of both familiar (Iranian) and foreign (American) cultural elements. The underlying premise is that cultural hybrid elements serve as vital markers of national identity, thought processes, and societal norms, and that their hybrid presentation in a memoir offers a compelling lens through which to understand the shifts in mindset and experience influenced by different cultural landscapes.

Literature Review

The foundational concept for examining textuality and hybridity lies in understanding the definition of a hybrid text. As Schäffner and Adab (2001, p. 169) articulate, “a hybrid text is a text that results from a translation process. It shows features that somehow seem out of place, strange, or unusual for the receiving culture, i.e., the target culture”. This inherent characteristic of translated works, particularly those rich in culturally specific items (CSIs), positions readers in a unique “dual space”. Shams Nejati et al. (2024, p. 60) elaborate on this, stating, “this ‘dual space’ phenomenon – the coexistence of original and translated cultural elements – functions as both a literary device and a translation challenge”.

A direct correlation exists between diasporic experiences and the hybridity observed in authored texts and their subsequent translations. Mollanazar and Parham (2010, p. 32) posit that “hybridity is a phenomenon believed to emerge in specific cultural spaces like postcolonial communities and diasporas”. In their study, Mollanazar and Parham (2010) further quantified this, reporting 180 instances of descriptive approaches, or hybridizations, within a Persian translation of a particular book. The significance of the selected book for this research is underscored by its notable richness in hybrid items.

This novel serves as a compelling illustration of a hybrid text, manifesting hybridity at both micro and macro levels. The narrative eloquently describes the intersection and interplay of two distinct cultures—Iranian and American—forming a story centered on identity, culture, and family. (Parham, 2010, p. 88)

For hybrid texts arising from diaspora contexts, Parham (2011) established a significant distinction between concrete and abstract expressions of diaspora. The translation and interpretation of these texts are best guided by specific theoretical frameworks. Notably, Fillmore’s Scenes and Frames Semantics (SFS) has been instrumental in detailing the processes of hybridization, rehybridization, and dehybridization (Birjandi & Parham, 2015; Mollanazar & Parham, 2009).

The profound influence of culture and culturally specific items on translation and the resultant hybridity is undeniable in contemporary discourse. Bassnett and Lefevere (1990), as cited in Bassnett (2007, p. 13), emphasized this interconnectedness, stating, “the object of study has been redefined; what is studied is text embedded within its network of both source and target cultural signs”. The significance of studying culture within translation has long been recognized. Nida (1964), in a passage cited by Bassnett (2011, p. 78), articulated the inseparable nature of language and culture: “a language cannot be understood ‘outside the total framework of the culture, of which the language in question is an integral part”.

Acquiring a culture can be achieved through various methods. Anthropologists suggest that “culture may be learned through formal or unconscious parenting, socialization or other inculcation through long term contact with others. It then becomes unconsciously shared amongst the group” (Katan, 2009, p. 74). Crucially for translation, Katan (2009, p. 82), referencing Agar (2006), highlights that “culture becomes visible only when differences appear”, implying that translators must effectively convey these cultural distinctions to illuminate the nuances of the source culture.

The act of translation inherently possesses the potential to enrich and advance societies and cultures. Woodsworth (2013, p. 74) notes that “translation has done much to enrich, advance or strengthen individual societies, nations or cultures – through language, art, scientific thought or values that have been imported”. However, he also acknowledges that “the impact of translation, however, can also be construed as negative”.

Every translation endeavor is underpinned by a rationale, as Toury (1978) posited that “translation activities should be regarded as having cultural significance” (as cited in Bassnett, 2007, p. 18). The profound cultural significance of translation is particularly evident in its role in fostering intercultural interaction. Bassnett and Lefevere (1998), cited in Bassnett (2007, p. 18), asserted that “in the 1970s, translation was seen, as it undoubtedly is, as ‘vital to the interaction between cultures’”. They further elaborated on the importance of studying this cultural exchange (as cited in Bassnett, 2007, p. 19).

Language and culture are fundamental in shaping individual experiences and perspectives. Sturge (2009, p. 67) points out that “[...] it will be difficult to grasp and convey experiences that take place within a different system of filters, outside our own frames of reference”. Consequently, translation transcends mere linguistic mediation, encompassing the transfer of intentions and perceptions. Katan (2004), as cited in Bassnett (2011, pp. 81-82), believed this role is complex, requiring translators “to involve interpreting not just the expressions of each cultural group, but also the intentions, perceptions, and expectations, which is much more problematic”.

Determining the extent of translator intervention is a critical consideration. Katan (2009, p. 70) suggests that “the extent to which a translator should intervene (i.e. interpret and manipulate rather than operate a purely linguistic transfer) will be in accordance with our beliefs about which frame(s) most influence translation”. In line with this, some scholars view translations as forms of rewriting. Bassnett and Lefevere, as quoted by Marinetti (2011, p. 27), stated that “the concept of ‘manipulation’ goes hand in hand with the notion of rewriting in helping to redefine translation after the cultural turn. Translation is rewriting and ‘rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power’”.

Translators are often viewed as mediators, facilitating cultural exchange and resolving cross-cultural barriers. Firoozeh Dumas’s endeavor to bridge cultural divides for her American readership, while commendable, introduces complexities that challenge the translation of her work into Persian. This aligns with Newmark’s (1981) concept of ‘the cultural value’ of translation, and resonates with the International Federation of Translators’ (n.d.) bylaws, which similarly posit that translation’s value lies in its capacity to “assist in the spreading of culture throughout the world” (as cited in Katan, 2009, p. 71).

A significant consideration in translation is the inherent difficulty in achieving perfect comprehension of the source text, irrespective of the strategies employed. Lefevere (1999) addresses this challenge, posing critical questions: “Do the grids always define the ways in which cultures will be able to understand each other? Are the grids, to put it in terms that may well be too strong, the prerequisite for all understanding or not?” (as cited in Bassnett, 2007, p. 20). When discussing translation frameworks and the transfer of culture, certain requirements are paramount. Nida and Taber (1969) outlined these essential criteria for a translation: “1. Making sense; 2. Conveying the spirit and manner of the original; 3. Having a natural and easy form of expression; 4. Producing a similar response” (as cited in Halverson, 2010, p. 379). Achieving adequate translation necessitates a deep contextual

understanding, which in turn enables translatability. As Bassnett (2011, p. 78) explains, “without this kind of contextual understanding, which necessarily involves rethinking one’s own position and mediating between the potential gaps created by fundamental cultural differences, adequate translation will not take place”.

Perspectives on translatability diverge. One viewpoint suggests that certain textual features, particularly cultural aspects, render translation impossible. Hermans (2009, p. 301) posits, “languages are embedded in the cultural environment of which they are a constitutive part”. Conversely, another perspective argues that all texts and culture-specific items are translatable, with differences arising solely from the strategies employed. Jakobson (1959), as cited by Hermans (2009, p. 300), believed that “all cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language’ and ‘[l]anguages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they may convey”.

Chesterman (1997) distinguishes between two key types of translation strategies: “global and local strategies, and between comprehension and production strategies” (as cited in Gambier, 2010, p. 414). The decision-making process for selecting an appropriate strategy can be complex, as accurately transferring the source text’s meaning is crucial. Translators must navigate choices that may prioritize the source text or the target audience’s cultural context. Consequently, the translator’s subjectivity becomes significant, and the intended function of the translation within the target culture guides these choices, reflecting a departure from source-focused theories and signaling a cultural turn in translation studies (Bassnett, 2007, p. 14).

Gambier (2010, p. 413) notes that various scholars use different terminology to describe the strategies translators employ. Broadly, translation strategies can be categorized into three types: “1. Shifting between languages; 2. Solving a problem; 3. Translation working process” (Gambier, 2010, pp. 413-415). The objective of translation is often to introduce culture-specific items from the source language to the target language. While foreignization is a common strategy, translations often undergo domestication. Venuti (1998) suggests that domestication can represent a standardization of translated language or may be an inherent aspect of all translation, stating, “translations, in other words, inevitably perform a work of domestication” (as cited in Paloposki, 2011, pp. 40-41).

Writers may choose to compose multilingual works for a variety of reasons, stemming from personal life experiences or the societal contexts in which they develop. Meylaerts (2013, p. 522) observes that “a writer’s multilingualism may be the result of his/her personal life story and/or of the specific societal context in which he/she grows up”. The prevalence of English as a global language means that many non-native English writers opt for English to achieve international success (Bassnett, 2011, p. 80).

Writers like Firoozeh Dumas can be categorized as travel writers. Bassnett (2007, p. 22) describes the travel writer as operating within a “hybrid space, a space in-between cultures, just as the translator operates in a space between languages, a dangerous transgressive space that is often referred to as ‘no-man’s land’”. The study of travel and its connection to translation presents a novel and intriguing research avenue. Bassnett (2007, pp. 22-23) highlights the significant, yet under-researched, relationship between these two fields, noting that “the travel writer and the translator are major elements in shaping the perspective one culture has of another, and it is interesting that so little research should have been undertaken to date on the relationship between travel and translation”.

Methodology

This research adopts a descriptive approach to investigate hybridity in Firoozeh Dumas’s memoir, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* (2003). The study examines the phenomenon of hybridity as manifested in the source text and its Persian translation by Mohammad Soleimaninia.

The selection of this novel was motivated by its critical acclaim, including bestseller status and award nominations (Thurber Prize, PEN/USA Award), and its rich portrayal of experiences blending Iranian and American cultures with a distinct humorous tone. The chosen Persian translation is the first authorized rendition, noted for its preface by the author and a significant degree of domestication, making it a pertinent subject for analyzing the rendering of hybrid elements. The analysis is based on the latest available editions of both the original English text (187 pages, approximately 65,000 words) and its Persian translation (192 pages, approximately 60,000 words).

Data collection focused on identifying and analyzing expressions that exemplify the text's hybridity. To achieve this, the analytical framework integrates Newmark's (1988) categorizations of culture-specific items, including those related to 1. ecology (Animals, plants, local winds, mountains, plains, ice, etc.), 2. material culture (Food, clothes, housing, towns, transport, and communications), 3. social culture (work and leisure), 4. organizations, customs, and ideas (Political, social, legal, religious, artistic), as well as 5. gestures and habits. These identified elements were then analyzed using Newmark's (1988) seventeen translation procedures: 1. transference, 2. naturalization, 3. cultural equivalent, 4. functional equivalent, 5. descriptive equivalent, 6. synonymy, 7. through-translation, 8. shift or transposition, 9. modulation, 10. recognized translation, 11. translation label, 12. compensation, 13. componential analysis, 14. reduction and expansion, 15. paraphrase, 16. couplets, and 17. notes, additions, glosses.

Furthermore, the study situates the translator's choices within the theoretical framework of domestication and foreignization (Schleiermacher, 1838, as cited in Venuti, 1995). This perspective, particularly Venuti's (1995) conceptualization of domestication as an ethnocentric reduction and foreignization as an emphasis on cultural difference, is used to evaluate how the Persian translation negotiates the source text's hybrid cultural expressions.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the corpus of the study resulted in the identification 350 hybrid elements. Among this, 285 focused on American culture and 65 on Iranian culture. These instances were categorized following Newmark's (1988) typology, and the corresponding translation strategies were evaluated through a comparative analysis of the source text and its Persian rendition. A few examples of the analysis of these hybrid elements are presented below.

Example 1: *And my parents still don't understand why teenagers want to be cool so they can be hot.* (p. 12)

برای پدر و مادر هنوز قابل درک نیست چرا نوجوان‌ها می‌خواهند cool باشند برای اینکه hot محسوب شوند. (p. 17)

In this example, the words *cool* and *hot* are translated through the strategy of transference.

Example 2: *More important, his Wednesday evening bowling nights had forced him to miss The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour.* (p. 16)

مهم‌تر از آن، برنامه بولینگ چهارشنبه عصرها باعث شده بود از سریال کمدی سانی و شر عقب بماند. (p. 22)

In this example, there is a use of couplets—the integration of two or more translation procedures—which facilitated the conveyance of complex cultural referents. The rendering of *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* as *سریال کمدی سانی و شر*, supplemented by a clarifying footnote, utilizes a combination of expansion and communicative glossing to bridge the gap in cultural literacy.

Example 3: *My father and I set out for Montgomery Ward.* (p. 44)

من و پدر راهی فروشگاه شدیم. (p. 50)

Here *Montgomery Ward* is translated into فروشگاه, which is an instance of the application of reduction strategy.

These three examples included hybrid elements that focused on American cultures. Example 4 is an instance of hybrid item focusing on Iranian culture.

Example 4: *We place them next to the stuffed turkey with all the trimmings.* (p. 74)

همه غذاها چیده می شوند کنار بوقلمون شکم پر و مخلفاتش. (p. 80)

In this instance, cultural equivalent was employed. This strategy was dominant in rendering Iranian hybrid elements. Here *trimmings* is rendered as مخلفاتش which is a term that captures the domestic culinary lexicon familiar to Persian readers.

Results and Discussion

The study's findings are categorized into two primary classes: hybrid elements reflecting American culture and those reflecting Iranian culture. For the American cultural elements (see Figure 1), 'material culture' emerged as the most frequent category. This category encompasses various aspects of daily life, including food, clothing, housing, towns, transportation, and communication. Following closely was 'social culture,' which includes references to universities, magazines, and movies. 'Organizations, customs, and ideas' and 'ecology' were the third and fourth most frequent categories, respectively, with no instances of 'gestures and habits' identified within this class.

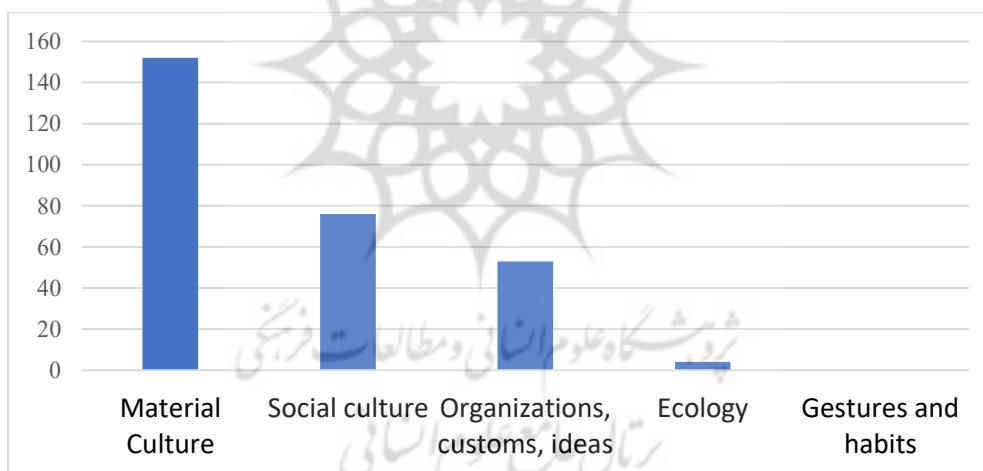


Figure 1. Frequency of Hybrid Elements Focusing on American Culture

Turning to the second class of data, which comprises hybrid elements reflecting Iranian culture (see Figure 2), 'material culture' again demonstrated the highest frequency. The second most prevalent category was 'organizations, customs, and ideas'. In this context, 'ecology' appeared as the fourth most frequent category, with a limited number of references to mountains and earthquakes. Similar to the American cultural elements, no instances of 'gestures and habits' were found among the hybrid elements echoing Iranian culture.

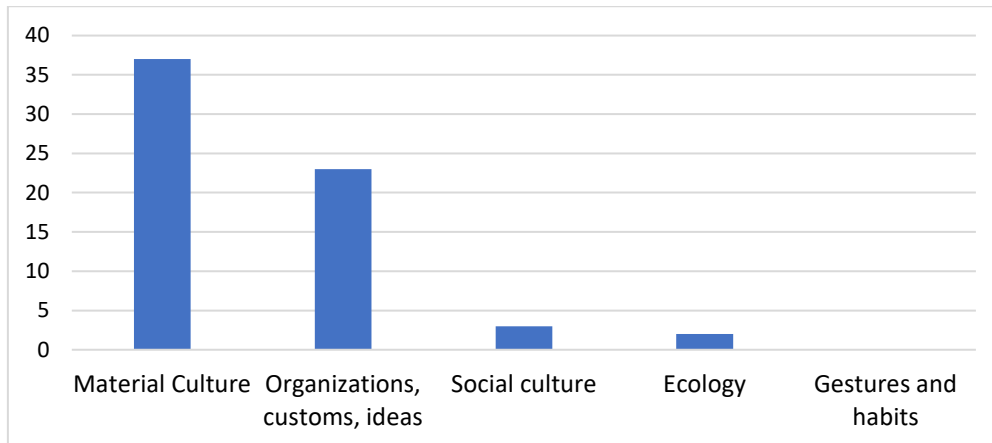


Figure 2. Frequency of Hybrid Elements Focusing on Iranian Culture

The most frequently employed strategy for translating hybrid elements reflecting American culture was transference (see Figure 3). The source text contained a significant number of names for food, films, ceremonies, and places, many of which may not be familiar to an Iranian audience. The second most common strategy was the use of couplets, often integrating transference with supplementary notes, additions, glosses, expansion, and occasionally reduction. While the translator did employ domestication strategies such as modulation and cultural equivalents, the high incidence of transference and couplets incorporating transference indicates a predominant approach of foreignization for hybrid elements reflecting American culture.

For hybrid elements echoing Iranian culture, the translator predominantly utilized cultural equivalents. To avoid redundant information for a familiar audience, the reduction strategy was employed as the second most frequent approach (see Figure 3).

Considering the analyzed data, the overall translation strategy for the novel appears to aim at foreignizing hybrid elements reflecting American culture while retaining a degree of domestication for hybrid elements echoing Iranian culture by simplifying or omitting elements presumed to be widely understood by the target readership.

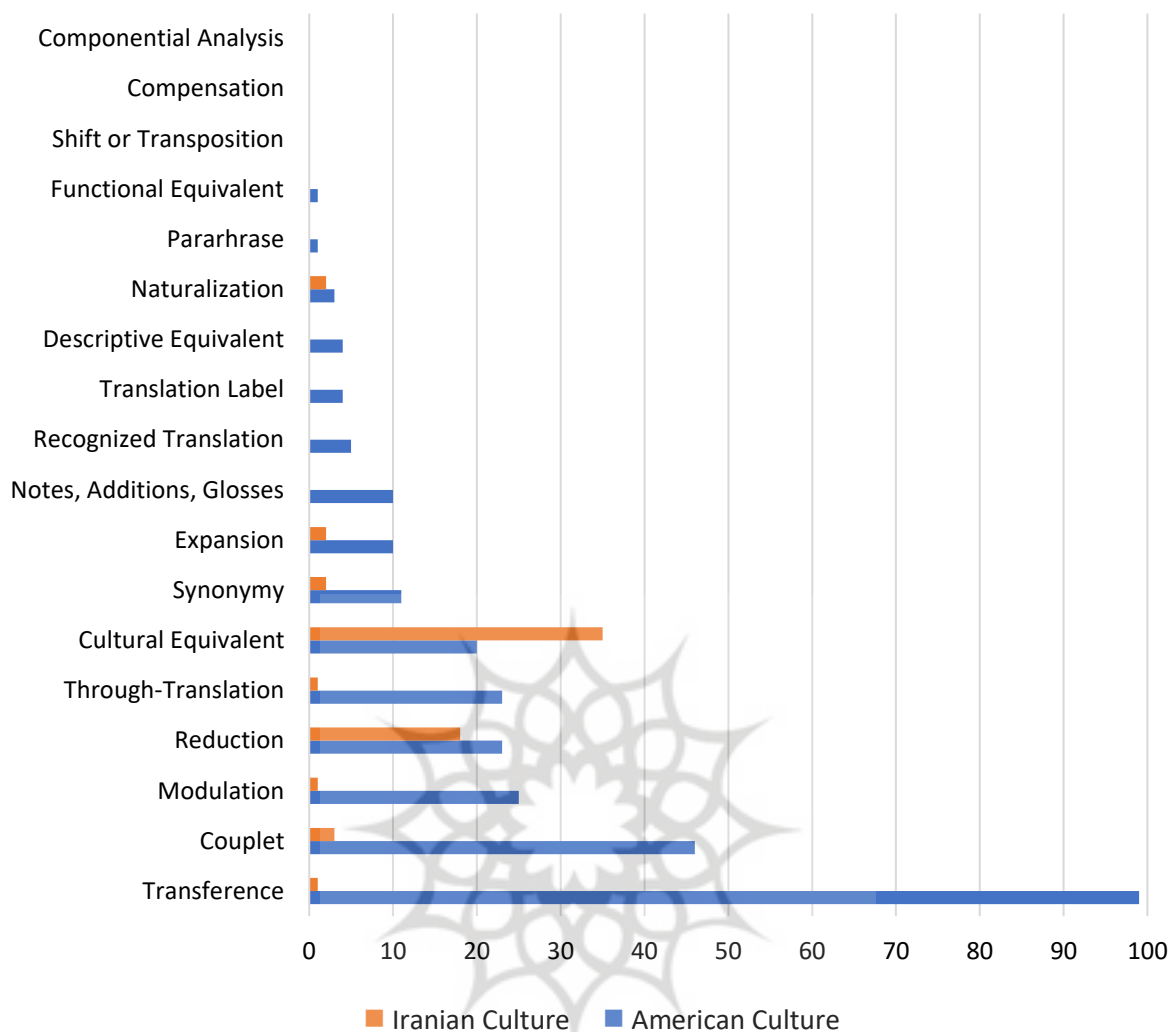


Figure 3. Frequency of Strategies Used to Translate Hybrid Elements Focusing on American and Iranian Cultures

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the phenomenon of hybridity within the text, categorizing the hybrid elements and analyzing the translation strategies employed, based on Newmark's framework. The primary objective was to ascertain whether the Persian translation of the book felt natural or alienating to a Persian readership. Furthermore, the research sought to identify the most prevalent translation strategies used by the translator when rendering the text from English into Persian, examining the differences in strategy application between hybrid elements echoing Iranian and American cultures. Ultimately, the study aimed to determine if the translated version, characterized by its hybridity, successfully conveyed a similar effect to the original English source.

The analysis revealed that 'material culture' constituted the largest category of hybrid elements. The predominant translation strategy observed was transference, indicating the translator's effort to foreignize the translation and achieve an effect on the target audience comparable to that of the source novel. For hybrid elements specifically echoing Iranian culture, the translator most frequently employed cultural equivalents. Additionally, reductions were used for certain explanations of Iranian culture in the source text, while expansions were applied to clarify foreign cultural items. The

significant use of couplets incorporating transference, along with footnotes, further highlighted the translator's inclination to preserve the American cultural aspects of the source text.

The distribution of translation strategies for hybrid elements demonstrated a foreignization approach when dealing with American cultural elements, through transference. Conversely, for familiar Iranian cultural elements, the translator opted for reduction and cultural equivalents. Generally, the translator aimed to maintain the distinct hybrid nature of the text by adopting a foreignization strategy. With the exception of the untranslated chapter, the overarching goal was for Iranian readers to experience and comprehend the foreign culture as presented in the source text, while being mindful of the religious and cultural sensitivities of Iranian society.

This research offers valuable insights for those studying hybrid translations, the potential unfamiliarity of Persian translated versions, the translation of memoirs, cross-cultural differences, and the strategies employed in translating hybrid elements. It also addresses whether translators of books rich in cultural specificities effectively convey the same impact to their readers.

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