Translation of ‘Memoirs of a Geisha’: Analysis and Insights on Cultural Perspective

Puteri Roslina Abdul Wahid and Anis Shahirah Abdul Sukur

Abstract—‘Memoirs of a geisha’ is an astonishing novel by Arthur Golden. The story revolves around a geisha, named Nitta Sayuri or formerly known as Sakamoto Chiyo. This English written novel unlocks the hidden world of Japanese’s complex rituals and the text is translated into 32 languages. This article opts to analyses the translation of Japanese’s cultural words, e.g. ecology, metaphor, taboo word, etc. into Malay language. Newsmark (1988)’s definition and categories of culture are used throughout this article to analyse the novel. Findings indicate that changes do occur due to cultural differences between the two languages. And the cultural translation procedures can be classified into three categories; (i) borrowing or transference procedure, (ii) adaptation between two cultural word, and (iii) description of the cultural word.

Index Terms—Culture, cultural word, translation procedure.

I. INTRODUCTION

We have to acknowledge that the translations of ‘Memoirs of a Geisha’ novel contribute a great deal towards spreading the knowledge of Japanese’ culture and all kinds of information contained in the novel. By being translated into 32 different languages, this breathtaking and remarkable novel offers a lot more than simply an exotic fable. And very often it functions as a historical document, a religious text, a literary text, etc. Thus, this article explores whether there exist similarities and connections between Malay and Japanese cultures. This article also analyses the differences between both texts, in terms of cultural differences.

Arthur Golden’s novel ‘Memoirs of a Geisha’ is written in English language and used as the source text (ST). While the translated version (TT) which is known as Kenang-kenangan Seorang Geisha is written in Malay language. Although some of the translation versions prove to be very good, there are some examples that can be used as evidence of the problems faced by the translators. As mentioned by Newsmark (1988), there will always be a translation problem unless there is cultural overlap between the source (SL) and the target language (TL). Besides the obstacle of transferring thoughts in the SL into the TL as exactly as possible, the problems were also caused by differences in values and thoughts, lack of information, inadequate translation, etc.

II. TRANSLATING CULTURAL WORDS

Literary translation is more than simply changing words from one language to another; it involves the intricate task of translating cultural words. Newsmark (1988:94) defines culture as ‘the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression’. Meanwhile Shuttleworth & Cowie (1997:35) define cultural translation as ‘a term used informally to refer to types of translation which function as a tool for cross-cultural research, or indeed to any translation which is sensitive to cultural as well as linguistic factors’. To be able to successfully translate a literary text, translators need to overcome the cultural words. Newsmark explains that most cultural words are easy to identify, since they are associated with a particular language and cannot be translated literally. This is due to the fact that literal translation would distort the meaning, and translators need to respect all foreign countries and their cultures. Adapting Nida, Newsmark (1988:95) divides cultural categories as follows:

- Ecology
- Material culture (artefacts) - food, clothes, places name and transportations
- Social culture - leisure and work
- Organisations, customs, ideas - political and social, religious, artistic
- Gestures and habits (often described in non-cultural language)

It would seem fairly evident that a creative literary translator must possess good cultural knowledge in order to ideally render the meaning into the TL. Once again, according Newsmark (1988), translation procedures are available in translating literary text. Transference is a translation procedure that offers local colour and atmosphere towards the target reader, however transference does not communicate, and it emphasises the SL culture and excludes the message. For example, Japanese’s cloth ‘kimono’ is translated as kimon’o in Malay language. Target reader, especially the Malay native speaker will find difficulties in understanding the shape, colour, size, etc. of a kimono. Nevertheless, usually the following are normally transferred in translation: geographical and topographical names; titles of untranslated literary works, plays, films; names of all living and dead people; names of periodicals and newspapers; names of private companies and institutions; street names, addresses, etc. (Newsmark, 1988:82).

In addition, Nord (1997:11) also mentions about translating literary text from functionalist approach. The word ‘functionalist’ means focusing on the function or functions of texts and translations. Nord (1997) highlights seven features that act as agents of literary communication and the communicative situation in which literary text occurs. And the seven features are: (i) the sender’ author - usually the author is a person known as a writer of the literary text, (ii)