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# The novel *Mütercim* as a site of transfiction: A case of translation in life and the translation of life in the transformational republican era in Turkey

Sema Üstün Külünk  
Doğuş University, Turkey  
[semaustunsema@gmail.com](mailto:semaustunsema@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** Translation has a rich history in Ottoman and Turkish literature, and a study of *transmesis* in a transfiction has great potentials for analyzing the praxis and pragmatics of translation in Turkey. This study focuses on the translational action in the mirror of fiction with a case study on the Turkish novel *Mütercim* (2013) [Translator] by Alper Gürkan. Investigating translation both as a performance (i.e., text) and an experience (i.e., agency), the analysis is constructed upon four categories: 1) actual translation in its technical sense; (2) the agency of the translator as a subject and object of the translation; (3) figurative/metaphoric use of translation; and (4) the potentials of mistranslation vis-a-vis pseudotranslation. The multi-layered translational baggage of the novel serves as a site *par excellence* to delimit the definition of translation, which begins as a faithful translation and ends up as an almost genuine writing, a mistranslation in the novel. Skillfully imposed attributions to change, transformation, fragmentation, and dislocation under a translational context determine the fate of both the text and the agent in *Mütercim*: corrupted and originally lost. This elegy for origins resonates in the discourse of the author as neo-Ottoman fantasy where we witness the emergence of translation as the lieu of historical criticism under the guise of a transfiction.

**Keywords:** Fictional translation; transfiction; fictional translator; *transmesis*, ideological translation.

## 1. Introduction

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ مَنْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ كُلَّ يَوْمٍ هُوَ فِي شَأْنٍ<sup>1</sup>  
(Surah *Rahman*, 55:29)

The investigation of translation in the mirror of fiction provides resourceful insights into the production, distribution, and reception of a translational act. As an attempt to delimit its very definition, this study approaches translation as a practice with different forms under varying spatial and temporal frameworks.

Translational acts and translatorial characters have long been used in many different literary works. However, these particular instances instrumentalizing translation in literature have remained unnoticed until recently in the scholarly

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<sup>1</sup> This Qur'anic ayah appears at the very beginning of the novel. It means "On Him depend all creatures in the heavens and on earth; [and] every day He manifests Himself in yet another [wondrous] way." (Asad, *Qur'an*, 55:29), and it constitutes the core of the narration, depicting the translation of a text, accompanied by the translation of a life in the constantly changing world.

research. To this end, the so called “fictional turn” in translation studies, in recent years, has directed attention to the literary treatment of translation in works of fiction. The issue has been subject to many studies from different perspectives and literary repertoires of varying culture zones (see Curran, 2005; Delabastita & Grutman, 2005; Ben-Ari, 2010; Wakabayashi, 2011; Kaindl & Spitzl, 2014; Ghazoul, 2015), envisaging translation as a postulate of cultural identity, tradition and/or memory (Pagano, 2002, p. 81).

As an attempt to integrate translation theory into a work of fiction, *transfiction* “recognizes the power of fiction as a vital and pulsating academic resource” and is defined as “an aestheticized imagination of translatorial action” (Kaindl, 2014, p.3). In an alternative vein, this study is characterized by a passionate concern to generate a multilayered understanding of translation as both a performance and an experience. The scope of the analysis is constituted on two foundational matters: text and agency. This broad perspective on translation is delineated under four headings: (1) actual translation (carried out and reported in the novel)- as translation in its technical sense; (2) the agency of the translator as a subject and object of the translation; (3) figurative translation- connotative meanings of translation under different frames of reference; and (4) mistranslation and/or pseudotranslation as the end product of translational performance and translatorial experience.

The data of the study is construed upon a detailed case study on the Turkish novel *Mütercim* [Translator]<sup>2</sup>, written by Alper Gürkan and published in 2013. The book *Mütercim* [Translator] provides a productive case of translation in fiction. In his novel, Gürkan (2013) creates an amalgam of actual and figurative translation with an intriguing translator character. The translational process of this political and controversial book is depicted through the transformation of the translator-protagonist. The spatial and temporal background of the narrative, which consists of the transformative years of early Republican era in Turkey witnessing great social, political, and cultural changes, thickens the translational layers of this particular literary work. In this framework, the translational act in *Mütercim* (2013) “constitutes the master metaphor of epitomizing the condition of the agents, evoking the human search for a sense of self and belonging in a puzzling world” (Delabastita, 2009, p. 111). While the agent performing this translation emerges as a *homo sacer*<sup>3</sup> (Beebee, 2012, p. 54), vividly exemplifying the parlous and vulnerable situation of the profession of a translator in conflicting situations. These framing conditions determine the fate of the narrated translation process and the translator. In this vein, *Mütercim* portrays a dilemmatic translational performance where the translator-protagonist is torn between producing an accurate and/or faithful translation in accordance with his initial motivation to be loyal to his spiritual-intellectual master and generating a mistranslation<sup>4</sup> as an ultimate resort for survival to escape the pressure of the ruling elites.

The analysis scheme of this data is designed as a parallel reading of translational performance and translatorial experience. In this metafictional

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<sup>2</sup> All translations provided within square brackets are mine, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> Referring to Giorgio Agamben, Thomas Beebee (2012) defines *Homo sacer* as “primal form of “outlaw,” where the term means “outside the law,” not from the point of view of the doer, but from the point of view of the punisher. The law neither punishes nor protects the sacred man or woman, who can be killed by anyone without consequences, meaning both that s/he is outside the law and that this very exteriority constitutes the law’s functioning” (p. 54).

<sup>4</sup> For a few examples of the articles on mistranslation See Valente (2019); Fishkin (2016), and Brickhouse (2013).

design, the translation of the texts triggers the translation of an individual self. For a refined understanding of transfiction in this narrative, the temporal (i.e., 1920-1930) and spatial (i.e., Turkey) framework of the novel requires further elaboration from the very beginning. Turkey went through remarkable reformative changes in its social, political, and cultural orders in the 1920s. Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Republican Turkey was established in 1923. The new Republic put into effect a number of reforms concerning language, the alphabet, the dress code, state administration, social structure, legislation and so on. The new nation state eradicated the traces of the former imperial rule from any possible aspect of life. The new order was foundationally characterized by Western orientation. The changing premises of the new state have been received as a radical rupture with the Ottoman roots. The discourse on this issue is still tensed between the Kemalist intellectuals, who praise the new ruling elites for their craft to break bonds with the past, and the proponents of the former rule, who are determined to cling on a Neo-Ottoman fantasy, envisaging Ottoman history as a golden age which would not be achieved by the new republican state (Ersanlı, 1996). In this context, I can safely state that Alper Gürkan, the author of *Mütercim*, bolsters the latter party by creating a dominant “loss of the original” narrative throughout the novel with references to manipulation, patronage, ethics, rewriting, and (in)visibility provided under the guise of fiction. The reflections of this ideal are well observed in different instances of translation in the novel, where Gürkan (un)intentionally winks at certain theoretical readings on translation with a cleverly narrated translational performance (i.e., the rendering of a controversial text) and translatorial experience (the transformation of the translator-protagonist).

## **2. Translation theory and translatorial agency in *Mütercim***

Translation appears as a foundational narrative tool throughout the novel *Mütercim*, which provides a wide spectrum of translational performance and translatorial experience. In this respect, it goes beyond dominant notions that circumscribe the definition of translation and, echoing Maria Tymoczko (2007, p. 313), portrays translation as an open concept. Accordingly, the virtue of enlarging the definition of translation simultaneously empowers the very positioning (not the status, though) of the translator in the given socio-political context. On this very point, Tymoczko (2007) skillfully attributes merit to this complex nature of translation and claims that this congenital uncertainty about the limits of the act is the underlying motive behind its functioning in different forms in varying temporal and spatial frameworks. Accordingly, it is possible to conceptualize and/or categorize translation “as a literary text, a linguistic construction, an example of cultural interface, a commercial venture, a sign of power, a feminist statement, and even perhaps a revolutionary tactic”. This sort of complexity increases geometrically with the framing references of the translational investigation” (Tymoczko, 2007, p. 107).

In this study, I contend that the novel *Mütercim* provides a resourceful site to examine the blurred edges of the category of translation and delineate the making of a translator as a protagonist of a literary work. The transfiction author benefits from the potentials of translation both as a process and as a product to create a literary narrative. As Klaus Kaindl (2014) puts it, “fictional depictions provide insights into the ideas, clichés and stereotypes of translating and interpreting that exist in a given society” (p. 14). In these cases, translation emerges as a metaphor and/or a theme and/or a framing narrative and/or a concrete act, creating a theory of its own. In this vein, translation stands out

with its expressive, symbolic and representative potential as an “icon of fluidity and multiplicity of modern culture” (Kaindl, 2014, p. 4).

In a similar vein, Beebee (2012) conceptualizes the fictional use of translation as *transmesis*, which he defines as “literary author’s use of fiction to depict acts of translation” with a “metaphorical conjunction of translation and mimesis” (pp. 2-3). The term includes various text types such as “texts whose mimetic object is the act of translation, the translator, and his or her social and historical contexts”; “texts that overtly claim to be translations, though no original exists”; “texts that make standard language strange to itself” and “texts that mime language reality such that the medium does not match the object depicted” (Beebee, 2012). In this framework, Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar (2017) posits that the notion of *transmesis* constitutes a productive subject of analysis placing the concentration on the plurivocal and heteroglossic nature of the act of translation (p. 638). Given the complex and politically charged history of the Turkish language, I think as a case study from Turkey *Mütercim* can provide a fruitful ground to review the concept of *transmesis*. Triggered by this motivation, this study aims to introduce an insightful and rare example of *transfiction* in Turkish literature, where the author cleverly utilizes *transmesis* as a narrative device via postulating translation as the main theme and translator as the main character of his literary work.

Postulating the translator as the leitmotif of the translation practice, I claim that the ethical baggage imposed on the translator is intertwined with the subject position of the self and the object position of the text. In other words, even in cases where the translator does not have a political agenda, still agency matters with “inherent ethical and ideological vectors of textual choices at all these levels” (Tymoczko, 2007, p. 216). In this process, the translator might face formal controls, coercion, oppression, and most notably censorship. In the case of *Mütercim*, we are introduced into all sorts of these difficulties through the story of the translator-protagonist, who is forced to produce a translated text against his initial will/motivation. The politics and ideology of translation impinge on the translational decisions yielding intriguing instances of pseudotranslation, mistranslation, non-translation and so on in different instances. In this regard, pseudotranslation basically is conceptualized by Gideon Toury (1995) as “texts which have been presented as translations with no corresponding source texts in other languages ever having existed – hence no factual ‘transfer operations’ and translation relationships” (p. 40). Mistranslation refers to (un)intentional erroneous examples of translated texts, and non-translation refers to a systemic resistance to translation with hostile or hospitable cases preventing translation from happening.

The Turkish literary field has hosted a number of examples where authors use translation as a thematic element and a translator as a literary character. Conceptualizing translation from different perspectives, these literary writings have been studied by translation scholars (see Erkul, 2005; Ece, 2016; Yılmaz-Gümüş, 2018). These studies are engaged with the representation of translation and translator vis-a-vis real-life instances which yield to differing translational performances and experiences. In other words, they are prevalingly concerned with the actual/concrete act of translation in comparison to realities of translation in Turkey with respect to text production and agency.

In this study, I intend to take a relatively new perspective focusing more on the conceptualization of translation as a figurative/metaphorical act and the translator as an agent simultaneously shaping and shaped by a translated text. To this end, I would like to contextualize the instrumentalization of translation by a literary author with references to *transmesis* (Beebee, 2012) and *transfiction*.

Questioning the conception of translation at several layers, (i.e., as a theme, as a metaphor, and as a concrete act of translation), the study begins with the identification of the author Alper Gürkan. The portrayal of his personal and professional habitus will provide clues for a better understanding of the motives behind his politically oriented fictional creation through translation. This is followed by a description of the plot with special attention to the temporal and spatial framework that governs the translation process and the characters for a refined portrayal of the translatorial narrative. Then, it will be followed by the exploration of praxis and pragmatics of translation through the novel. In this vein, I will elaborate on translation in a tri-faceted paradigm: as an actual/concrete act, as a figurative act and as a theme of a literary narrative. The paper concludes with an attempt to delimit the very definition of translation through a discussion of the potentials of mistranslation vis-à-vis pseudotranslation with a prevailing focus on the text and agency.

### **3. The author of transfiction: Alper Gürkan (b. 1980)**

The author of the book is Alper Gürkan, a young literary figure of Turkish literature. He is a sociologist, writing in various Turkish journals such as *Dergâh*, *Ayraç*, *Opus*, *Hece*, and *İtibar* on socio-political issues particularly concerning modernization and Islamism. Along with Mütercim [Translator], he has other books such as *Karagöz'ün Rüyası* [The Dream of Karagöz] (2017), *İslam Medeniyeti Söylemi* [The Discourse of Islamic Civilization] (2017), *Dünyevi Aklın Buhranı* [The Depression of the Earthly Reason] (2017), *Ütopya ve Modern Dünya* [Utopia and the Modern World] (2018). In his works Gürkan prevalingly elaborates on the potentials and pitfalls of the modern world vis-à-vis the grand narrative on Islamic civilization as well as comparative philosophical discussions.

The author Gürkan is not a prolific figure but rather a silent one who is rarely seen on the media. There is only one available interview with him. Fortunately, this interview provides important hints about the underlying motivations of the production of *Mütercim*. The metadiscourse he creates on his literary work illustrates his conception of translation, and how he instrumentalized the rich texture of translational act as a device of his narrative. Beginning his novel with a Qur'anic ayah dictating the continuous manifestation of any living creature in the world, Gürkan refers to the nature of the earth with a divine reference (Bildirici, 2013). In this regard, he posits that change and transformation constitutes the main themes of his novel for which translation both as a performance and an experience serves as a great narrative frame. Besides, Gürkan is quite expressive about his Islamic orientation and its reflections on his work. He depicts the transformation of Turkey in the early Republican era as the break of the bonds from Ottoman legacy which inevitably designated a new citizen model under modern premises. According to Gürkan, the metamorphosis the society experienced altered the very self of the Muslim individual under a secular ordering (Bildirici, 2013, p. 150).

The stance of the author can be viewed in relation to Neo-Ottoman perspective which envisages a conservative Islamic formulation of Ottoman history as a golden age and depicts the new Republic as a radical breach with the imperial bonds without continuities. Through the ethical dilemmas and reformative conditions of the translator-protagonist, Gürkan (2013) cleverly constructs a translational plot in which the rendering of an original text ends up with a mistranslation, which I suggest reading as a criticism of the socio-political transformation in the new nation-state born through the ashes of a collapsed empire.

The metanarrative Gürkan has built over his work draws attention with its political/ideological and philosophical orientation. In this vein, the first determines the fate of the translated text which ends up with distortion and loss of the origins through asymmetrical power relations, manipulation and censorship. While the latter reflects as the ontological quest of the translator-protagonist whose self is deconstructed and reconstructed through the translation process. In this context, I suggest reading this dual (mal)-transformation observed on both the text and agency as a composite historical criticism of a literary author on a significant era for Turkish history under the guise of translation.

#### 4. The lieu of transfiction: The plot of *Mütercim*

The plot is constructed on a translational performance and experience, which refer to the translation of a text and the conductions of a translator respectively. *Mütercim* is set in Ankara in the 1920s, which hints at the new capital of the early Republican Turkey and the years of radical social, political, and cultural reforms with trademark repercussions of the Ottoman rule.

The story begins with the introduction of the protagonist Halid Hamdi, who would be called as *Mütercim* [Translator] in the rest of the book. He has a wealthy family and leads an extravagant life in Paris. Following the death of his father, he comes to Istanbul and meets Mütercim Arif [Translator Arif], with whom his life would radically change. Arif is a prominent Muslim intellectual leading a *tekke* [dervish lodge] with a number of followers. As an Islamic and politically oriented figure, Arif self-commissions and begins to translate a Russian book *Dönüşüm* [Transformation]<sup>5</sup>, which constitutes the main site of the catalyst throughout the narration. With his death, Halid Hamdi (the protagonist of *Mütercim*) continues this translation on the will of his master. Then, Halid Hamdi moves to Ankara for an official post as a translator, but he continues to translate this Russian book.

His relocation to Ankara (which serves as the center of political life) begins to affect the translation process. Reverberations of communism in the translated book turn into the prevailing lieu of the conflict in the novel. Under the impact of the *Takrir-i Sukun Kanunu*<sup>6</sup> [Law on the Maintenance of Order] (1925), the translation is brought under official inspection. A political figure who has a post in the government intervenes in the translation process. He asks the translator to add, omit and change many sentences in the translation. This character whose name is not specified symbolizes censorship and institutional patronage over translation throughout the story.

Another important character of the book is Zekeriya Bey. As a close friend of the translator-protagonist, he appears as a co-translator in certain instances. He stands out with his prolific support for the preservation of the communist implications of the original book in the translation and portrays a powerful image with his cultural capital.

Furthermore, the theme of love appears as a determinant theme in the novel. The translator finds himself in a dilemmatic situation and is asked to make a choice between his love (marrying Gülcemal and leading a happy life) and preserving his loyalty to the source text and facing trial at court and even the death penalty. He attempts to abandon the translation altogether, but he is not allowed to. Then, he decides to manipulate the translation by omitting any

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<sup>5</sup> The original title of the book *Dönüşüm* in Russian is not provided within the story.

<sup>6</sup> With the enactment of this law, the single-party government demanded full political authority to curb any activity including the press to preserve and maintain security and order.

controversial statement in the original in accordance with the demands of the political order. To avoid any charges against his translation, he changes the target text to such extent that it might well be defined as a genuine text on its own right. At some point, he overtly states that he quitted rendering the source text and began to write a new text. In the end, he delivers a mistranslation in which the original is considerably distorted. However, his attempts do not save translator Hamdi. The translator-protagonist ends up as a victim of a conspiracy and is found guilty of communist manifestations in his translation and is sent to exile. Endeavoring to find a solution, he exchanges his identity with someone else. Hamdi loses his very self and continues his life under the name of a stranger which can be interpreted as the resonance of the loss of the original in translation. The novel ends with the delirium of the translator becoming the text he translated: corrupted and originally lost.

## **5. Praxis and pragmatics of translation in *Mütercim*: Text and agency**

This section presents a comprehensive translational analysis of *Mütercim*. The theme of ‘transformation’ prevails throughout the narrative. In this regard, scrutinizing translation at different layers provides resourceful insights in a fictional work of literature, which is defined by J. D. Caputo (1997) as “an institution which tends to overflow the institution”, evoking the “unlimited right of writing and reading... to engender fictions against the prevailing sense of reality” (p. 58). The findings of the analysis are presented under four subheadings: actual translation (i.e., the transformation of the original book into a target text), translatorial agency (i.e., the personal and professional portrayal of the translator), figurative translation (i.e., metaphoric use of translation as a narrative tool), and scrutinizing on the potentials of mistranslation vis-à-vis pseudotranslation.

### **5.1 *Mütercim*: Actual translation as a framing narrative**

The book *Mütercim* incorporates a rich texture of translational references concerning originality, authorship, conceptualization of translation as well as different translation practices. First, the title and the author of the source book are never precisely specified in the novel. The novelist mentions speculations on the identity of a mystical Russian author. Among the rumors the name Grigori Rasputin (1869-1916), an imperial traitor and an influential Russian intellectual, stands out. On this very point, authorless representation of the original can be interpreted as a challenge against asymmetrical power relations between source and target texts which subverts the traditional dichotomy constituted between creation and reproduction (Arrojo, 2002, p. 172) or as a deliberate preference to create a translator in the absence of the author’s collaborator (Anderson, 1995, p. 72). However, it is revealed in the novel that these assumptions do not hold true for *Mütercim*, which indeed echoes clichés of the translational conceptions rather than challenging them.

Actual practice of translation in the narrative is shaped in accordance with the social, political and cultural premises of the period. The practice of interlingual translation is conducted in a bi-faceted manner. First, the translation is conducted on the basis of the Russian original. Second, the French translation of the original is also included into the translation process. It was common among the intellectuals of the late Ottoman and early Republican eras to be competent at French as a consequence of the educational and socio-cultural capitals of the period. In this vein, the French translation *La Métamorphose* was used as an intermediary translation which is expressed as follows: “While he

was editing formerly translated parts, he was also comparing them with the French translation of *Dönüşüm*” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 88).

Furthermore, intralingual translation emerges as a part of narration. It is embedded into the socio-political changes the country went through as well. In this regard, the narrator refers to the Turkish language reform<sup>7</sup> in 1928. The ban of the Arabic alphabet and its replacement with the Latin script inevitably had repercussions on the translation process. The translation of the Russian book starts before the language reform by Mütercim Asım (i.e., master of the translator-protagonist Halid Hamdi) with the title *Tagayyür-ü Muhteva* [Change of the Content] (Gürkan 2013, p. 41). Following this linguistic engineering project, Halid Hamdi retranslates the parts that were formerly rendered by his master and changes the title of the book to *Dönüşüm* [Transformation] (Gürkan 2013, p. 42). His motivation to Turkify the translation by avoiding the use of Arabic and Persian words is intriguingly emphasized in the novel. The implementation of intralingual translation as a requirement of the natural flow of life in the narrative is crucial from two perspectives. First, it echoes one of the premises of the “retranslation hypothesis” which postulates the ageing of translation (Berman, 1990, p. 2). The issue of ageing in translations is a context-bound issue, and in this case, it is determined by the political rule makers rather than the inner dynamics or meaning makers of the literary repertoire. Second, the critical tone of the author is perceived in the depiction of the conditions that necessitated the intralingual translation, which can be interpreted as a resonance of the authorial stance. In other words, it can be read as a criticism of the relevant trajectories symbolizing the Ottoman and Turkish Republican eras, where the latter blossoms with the death of the former.

Moreover, the nature of translation in the novel merits attention. Collaborative translation, which is not problematized but portrayed as a part of the natural flow of the translational process, is exemplified and praised in many instances throughout the story. This conceptualization well relates to the view that “all acts of reading, or acts of translation are collaborative acts of writing, are versionings” (Littau, 2010, p. 446). In one case, the spiritual and intellectual master of the translator-protagonist explains complex concepts and nuances that the readership might not be acquainted with, and the translator produces a verbatim translation accordingly: “What was left to Hamdi was to literally translate (*düz çeviri yapmak*)” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 41). In another instance, an intellectual figure comes out and stimulates the reading of the source text with his cultural capital “to interpret the book from a different perspective” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 95). These cases demonstrate the plurivocal translatorial agency in the novel with reference to the asymmetrical power relations constructed between the translator and other agents. In these instances, the translator-protagonist is portrayed as a figure entrapped between ideological tensions with little space to move on his own will. At the same time, other agents who get involved in the translation process in different ways are highlighted with their powerful positions deriving from their status in the society as spiritual and/or intellectual leaders.

Furthermore, an unproductive but still frequently cultivated land of translation – the concept of ‘loyalty’— is visited in this translation-oriented narrative. The translation begins as a verbatim rendering displaying loyalty to

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<sup>7</sup> The prelude of the language reform came in 1928. The reform outlawed Arabic-Persian alphabet and replaced it with the Latin alphabet. The reform envisaged purification of the language from words of foreign -mainly Arabic and Persian- origins and it was conducted by committees assigned under the root of *Türk Dil Kurumu* [Turkish Language Society]. (for a detailed analysis of Language reform see Yücel, 1968)



the original. However, the almost slavish adherence to the original leaves its place to creative writing in the course of the story. Due to the controversial and politically oriented content of the original book, the translator is forced to make omissions and changes. At first, these alterations were illustrated as the nature of the translational act with the following words: “He was a translator. His job was to render the words... “To transform” constituted the same essence of his job just as the book he translated. He was renewing, explaining, explicating, and above all transforming the source text” (Gürkan 2013, p. 68). However, they were indeed footsteps to justify the upcoming translational decisions before the readership. The official inspection and intervention come to a point which makes it impossible for the translator to continue translating and makes it inevitable for him to resort to creative writing:

Beginning to disregard nuances, Hamdi would either use his translation, or the translation of the French translation, or a completely different meaning he produced via the mixture his translation and the translation of the French translation. He would begin to apply the latter more frequently. He would find himself in a different state of tranquility with his new experience of creative production. (Gürkan 2013, p. 88)

The ultimate state of translation in this novel reflects the slippery slope between reproduction and creation. Interestingly, the author’s concentration on creativity serves as a disguise for the manipulation of the source text rather than praising authentic production.

Besides, the reception of translation recounted in the novel evokes the network of relations within the relevant literary system. There are a number of commentaries published on this translation. The titles of these commentaries such as *Metamorfozlar* [Metamorphoses], *Kozadan Sonra* [After the Cocoon], *Kelebeğin Rüyası* [The Dream of the Butterfly] are in harmony with the framing theme of the novel: transformation. The spiritual master of the translator-protagonist comments on these criticisms with the following sentence: “Their motivation is to (mis)interpret the world differently from its essence” (Gürkan 2013, p. 44). However, one of these criticisms that the translator and his master do not regard as crucial will bring the end of the translator-protagonist and determine the fate of the translation. In this case, a journalist compares the translation of Hamdi in Turkish with the already available French translation of the original book and accuses Hamdi of bigotry (Gürkan 2013, p. 216). The findings of the critic become the harbinger of the catalyst in the narrative and the fictional translator-protagonist shares the fate of many actual translators in Turkey. He is taken to court for trial and found guilty, which is a vivid resonance of the conditions under which many translatorial agents work in the Turkish context. The translation is turned into an arena of ideological combat in fiction as follows:

He was taken under custody the same day and admitted that the work he presented as a translation was fake. Following its distribution, a journalist claimed in his column that the translation had nothing in common with its French translation and reported it to the government with the claim that this translation served to benefits of the anti-regime supporters. (Gürkan, 2013, p. 222)

The final remarkable point on the conceptualization of translation in *Mütercim* relates to temporality. The case elaborates on the time-bound nature of translations vis-à-vis originals. The translator protagonist is seen questioning “How could a text written before the regime could be against the regime?” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 63). This inner dialogue reflects the mindset of the character upon translation and evaluates the accusations against his translation as an

anachronistic misinterpretation. This focus on temporality evokes the function of translation to bring a dated text back into circulation in a different socio-political and cultural context, which can remind one of the notions of “afterlife” postulated by Walter Benjamin (2002).

### **5.2 *Mütercim: Agency as the translator-protagonist***

The construction of the protagonist as a translator serves well the narrative purposes of the novel based on the themes of change and transformation. There are two translator characters in the novel: Halid Hamdi, the translator-protagonist, and Mütercim Arif, his master and initiator/self-commissioner of the translation.

The author cleverly ties the evolution of the translation to the peculiarities of the characters in the narrative. In this regard, Mütercim Arif is portrayed as a spiritual leader of a dervish lodge [*tekke*] with a number of followers. He is quite competent at many foreign languages, including French, Russian, Armenian, Greek, Arabic and Persian (Gürkan 2013, p. 85). He initiates the translation on his very own will, which is defined as a consequence of personal interest and aspiration to serve the cultural wellbeing of the society. He conducts the first parts of the translation without any external intervention and emerges as an omnipotent commissioner and translator, which strikingly differs from his disciple, the translator protagonist Halid Hamdi.

Halid Hamdi is characterized mostly as a mimicry of the clichés that prevail in the field of translation studies. In this regard, this translator-protagonist is a weak and vulnerable figure. He does not occupy a significant position in the society and is mostly under the guidance of others. The character composition of Halid Hamdi determines the fate of the translational performance and experience in the narrative. Powerful non-translatorial agents easily intervene into the translation process and force the translator to distort the original in accordance with the premises of socio-political order.

His character is delineated on absolute resoluteness throughout the novel. He does not prefer to become a translator out of his free will but finds himself as one in the course of events (Gürkan 2013, p. 85). His dependence on others is at such a fatal level that even his existence rests on others, which is conveyed to the readers as an inner dialogue: “He had nobody to prove that he existed” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 77). The reproduction of this desperate image can be interpreted as an attempt to prepare the readership for his corrupted ending (i.e., transtraitor) and his manipulated performance (i.e., the mistranslation), which are sequentially depicted as follows: “He was indeed doubtful about the accuracy of the interpretation of certain parts of the text along with some of the additions, both proposed by Zekeriya Bey, whom he could not object to, and desperately approved” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 97).

The unbroken vulnerability of the translator peaks with the increasing official pressure over the translation. Symbolizing the ethical dilemmas and intellectual burden on real-life translators, the struggle of the translator comes to a point where he loses his mental health and cannot distinct reality from imagination. This deceptive portrayal of the translator can remind one of the deliriums of the translator character, Fabrizio, in Francesca Duranti’s novel *The House on Moon Lake* (2000). Nevertheless, it should be noted that Fabrizio exhibited a powerful translator image quite differently from Halid Hamdi. It was the myth that he made up on his very own will that led to the dissolution of the narrative in *The House on Moon Lake* (2000). However, it was the external conditions (i.e., social, and political circumstances of the period) rather than personal preferences that brought the hysteria in *Mütercim*. In other words, the delirium of the over-empowered translator character in former literary work

resonated as an incapacitation story in the case of *Mütercim*, leading to an unhappy ending for both the text and the agency.

### **5.3 *Mütercim*: Figurative translation as a site of metaphors**

Elaboration on the figurative use of translation unfolds the potentials of translation with its rich text— and agent-oriented texture as a tool of literary narrative. The use of translation as a metaphoric theme begins at the very debut of the novel. It starts with a Qur’anic ayah, stating that “On Him depend all creatures in the heavens and on earth; [and] every day He manifests Himself in yet another [wondrous] way.” (Asad, *Qur’an*, 55:29). In this vein, change is posed as a natural phenomenon of human life resonating from the holy creator. Accordingly, the focus on translation can be interpreted as a symbolic guise for transformation in the moral and material world. Besides, it can also be construed as a resonance of the above-mentioned conception of “afterlife” (Benjamin, 2002), where the original gains a new life form, a new manifestation via translation.

Change is integrated into the narrative in a multi-faceted manner. Changing ontological quest for the self, ideological views and religious beliefs are symbolized under a single translation process. The novel adheres to the theme of transformation to such an extent that the translational performance and translatorial experience of the protagonist cannot be differentiated from the translated text depicted in the novel: “The conditions made it necessary for him to change both internally and externally just as his translation titled as *Dönüşüm* (Transformation)” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 156).

The theme of transformation is prevalently associated with ‘loss’, which equally affects the text and the agent in the novel. In the end, the translation loses its bonds with the original and the translator loses his identity/roots. The author skillfully integrates the destiny of the translation into the fate of the translator-protagonist, which is narrated as follows in many passages: “His only wish was the disappearance of anything that was remembered with his name” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 11); “he was so absorbed in the translation that he did not notice the fact that he began to lose his identity” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 95).

The chaos that the translator-protagonist experiences in personal and professional life leads to the production of a “mistranslation” in the end. On this point, it is particularly emphasized that this was not a free choice of the translator but a result of the framing socio-political conditions: “Not becoming himself would turn into the only way of becoming himself in time... Surrendering to the imperative to abandon the truth for the sake of the intended meaning in translation became the reflection of his very self and his life” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 71). Constant emphasis on “fear” in the novel can well be interpreted as an authorial reflection on the novel. To be more precise, the attention on the theme of fear can be read as an implicit criticism of Alper Gürkan (the author) against the policies and reforms conducted by the new rule-makers of the Republican era.

The initial *modus operandi* of Halid Hamdi is also transformed in the course of narration. His motivation to serve the public via introducing a foreign work to the target repertoire is replaced with an ultimate endeavor to survive. This radical shift changes the nature of translation from a faithful rendering to the creation of a new text, which I suggest defining as a “mistranslation”. The case is well accompanied with the loss of identity for the translator, who is said to continue his life under a different name. Ending up as a translated man, Halid Hamdi “wakes up to the mornings of a stranger, and lives through the dreams of someone else” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 11), losing his origins, sharing the fate of the text, he has translated. This elegy for origins can also be read in relation to the neo-Ottoman discourse, envisaging a golden imperial period as the original

in accordance with the portrayal of socio-political dynamics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Turkey (especially the new political orientation after 2002). In the narrative, it is the establishment of the new nation-state that brings the dissolution of the translation and the translator character. It is not denied that change was inevitable in this new world order; however, (according to the author) this change did not end well, which is symbolized in the tragic fate of the translation and the translator. The over-emphasis on the breach of bonds with the original should be noted within this context for a better understanding of the meta-narrative constructed on *Mütercim*.

The change of the society resonates on supporting characters of the novel as well. Zekeriya Bey, formerly a radical supporter of communism, becomes a silent and suppressed invisible man; happy family girl Gülcemal turns into an orphan; non-religious Talip becomes a devout man; a Christian man converts to Islam, etc. These changes observed in the background – which I suggest interpreting as instances of figurative translation—hint at the changing historical dynamics of the society in the relevant temporal framework.

Last but not least, daydreaming emerges as a frequent theme in the translational narrative. Empowering the scenes portraying the delirium of the translator, the inner-dialogues of the translator-protagonist purport an almost invisible translator character: “he was not sure whether it was a dream or the very reality that upended his mind” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 74) and “he was down with the disease of hesitating to define reality over dream” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 91). This obscurity which embodies many instances of the figurative translation should not be considered separately from the actual translation. On the contrary, the point where it becomes impossible for the translator to distinguish reality from dream also constitutes the breaking point for the translation which echoes (in my mind) the unanswered question “where does a translation stop being a translation and becomes an original?” in translation studies.

#### ***5.4 Mütercim: Potentials of mistranslation vis-à-vis pseudotranslation***

The translational journey to produce a “proper” translation of a Russian original turns into a story of misfortune in *Mütercim*. The end product presented as the translation is a fake rendering of the source text, which fits the definition of mistranslation. The translator produces a text that only includes statements in accordance with the official ideology/politics of the period rather than directly conveying the messages of the source text. However, towards the end of the novel, humble and simple interventions in the translation give place to utmost alterations and the narrator begins to define the process as creative writing rather than translation. This is where a number of questions concerning the poetics and politics of translation arise in this study.

First, when does a translation stop being a translation? Is it the very existence of a source text or textual correspondence between a target and source text that makes a rendering translation? In the case of *Mütercim*, the end product is defined simultaneously as both a false translation and creative writing. It is depicted as a false translation because the translator is forced to make so many changes that the translated text has not much in common with the source text. It is also portrayed as a form of creative writing because the translator-protagonist begins to write with his very own words ignoring what actually was written in the original text. Even this single instance shows the rich and complex texture of translational act because one can define the end product of the narrative as either a translation and/or genuine writing, and neither of them is wrong as long as it is justified.

Second, does fidelity vs. creativity constitute an accurate binary opposition? The conception of translation dwells heavily on literary production which prioritizes aesthetic production, in which creativity emerges as a

prevailing concern. At the same time, fidelity can occur as a concern for any kind of translation; and these two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In *Mütercim*, the Russian original is a non-literary political book for which one can expect the narrator to put emphasis on faithfulness. However, *Mütercim* does the contrary and portrays a background in which fidelity to the original is no longer possible. It is where creativity appears as a matter of concern in the narrative, but it is of a different kind which does not have much to do with aesthetics. It is mainly concerned with the translators' ability to fit into the expectations of the meaning-making agents by creating a text in accordance with their orders. It is seen that non-literary contexts can evaluate creativity from a different perspective and can place fidelity just at the opposing end of a translational duality.

Third and more importantly, is it possible to think of mistranslation as a form of pseudo-translation? Mistranslation is to translate wrongly, inefficiently, inappropriately, and/or incorrectly. It is not treated as a term on its own right but as a negative form of translation. It might be a result of deliberate preferences or indeliberate actions. That is to say, the translator can produce a mistranslation for a certain motivation or his/her translation can be considered so by others despite the fact that it was unintentional. On this point, one might question the applicability of the term 'non-translation' as well. Non-translation requires a (omni)potent, powerful, and self-commissioned translator figure who has a determinative role in the translation practice and is motivated to non-translate the related text for a purpose coming out of his/her very own will. However, the translatorial agency in *Mütercim* does not bear any of these features; thus, the relevant context crosses out non-translation in the scope of this study.

On the other hand, pseudotranslation basically is conceptualized by Toury (1995, p. 40) as "texts which have been presented as translations with no corresponding source texts in other languages ever having existed – hence no factual 'transfer operations' and translation relationships". In this former case, it is the comparison of the target text with the source text that determines "mistranslation", whereas in the latter there is no source text that makes it feasible for any comparative analysis. According to Toury's (1995) postulate, the translation presented in *Mütercim* cannot be a pseudotranslation, as there is a specified source text. It can well be defined as a mistranslation as it is clearly stated that the translator distorts the meaning in his rendering. He manipulates the text to such an extent that in the end it has almost nothing in common with the original. It is presented to the authorities as the translation of the Russian original but, in fact, it is an original text produced by the translator. This is where the question arises: "Is it possible to define an utmost mistranslation as a pseudotranslation?" In my view, the answer is affirmative, because in the case of *Mütercim*, it is a fake translational attempt which is constructed on a false and illusionary correspondence between the source and the target text. It reveals how the distinction between translation and mistranslation is an artificial and unstable one.

The path to mistranslation is constructed under the shadow of the historical and socio-political conditions of the early Republican era in Turkey. In the 1920s, the country had just gone through great independence wars and all the citizens were expected to serve for the benefit of the new nation state. The performance of the translator-protagonist is positioned in this contextual framework and the motivation to serve the state constituted the justification for the production of this (mis)translation. The guise of national duty becomes so symbolic in the narrative that translational service is compared to military service, both serving the interests of the country: "As he become disabled during the war against the enemy in the 1920s, now his country, for which he

could not fight in the battleground due to his disability, was waiting for his service with his pen” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 49). In this way, (mis)translation turns out as a glorious activity to bring about the intended change in the relevant socio-political engineering process.

Furthermore, intervention in translation becomes more vivid in the form of self-censorship in the course of the novel as follows: “He continued to produce the translation, actually an original text that he made up to avoid pressure of official inspection from the Parliament” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 151); and “After a few months, he successfully delivered the text that he wrote himself rather the genuine translation of *Dönüşüm* to the deputy member” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 176). The manipulation over the practice is first inspected and guided by a state official and then he leaves the floor to an institution: *Ankara Tercüme Encümeni* [Committee of Translation of Ankara], which can well be specified as a form of institutional patronage in this context. The involvement of this official structure increases the tension of the translational act and leaves the translator-protagonist completely at odds with the original text.

Last but not least, the creation of a new text under the guise of translation inevitably brings forth discussions on the ethics of translation as well. The translator is not at ease for his act, which is frequently expressed in the novel: “He also thought that what he did was immoral, but he was also convinced that he had no other choice” (Gürkan, 2013, p. 153). He does not choose but is forced to mistranslate to avoid accusations and court trials, which is a reverberation of the vulnerable situation of translators with no legal protection throughout history and, unfortunately, at present as well. The novel ends with the demise of translation and the delirium of the translator, leading respectively to a rejected/devalued translation and *homo sacer* whose existence does not mean anything to anyone.

## 6. Conclusion

*Mütercim* is an insightful work of fiction in the Turkish literary repertoire which delimits the definition of the translation practice. As an attempt to integrate translation theory into practice, the transfiction author (Alper Gürkan) constructs multi-layered translational performance and translatorial experience in this work. In this regard, we witness the transformation of a translator-protagonist through the transformation of a translated text. Actual translation practice evolves simultaneously with the agent of the translation (the translator). The figurative use in the literary narrative is cleverly embedded in the translation, which emerges as the prevailing metaphoric tool in the novel. The translation of an autonomous Russian original begins as a faithful rendering process but ends up being an almost new original writing due to several forms of (un)official intervention, censorship, and (un)institutional patronage. The shift in the path of the text is reflected in the fate of the translator as well. A humble translator figure turns into a politically oriented but still weak traitor, a *transtraitor*, in the course of the narrative.

The metaphoric use of translation adds to the translational baggage of the novel at several instances of *transmesis*. Along with the transformation of the translator-protagonist and his translation, a radical activist turns into a silent and oppressed man (Zekeriya Bey), a happy family girl turns into an orphan (Gülcemal), a non-religious man becomes a devout person (Talip), and a Christian man converts to Islam, which I suggest reading as a form of translation in the figurative sense with an emphasis on the transforming nature of these instances. The material and moral changes witnessed through the protagonist and the supporting characters serve as the harbinger of the intriguing alteration

of the translated text from a faithful translation into an instance of creative writing, which I prefer to contextualize with references to mistranslation vis-à-vis pseudotranslation.

As a literary site, *Mütercim* both challenges conventional norms of translation and maintains its recurrent clichés. First, recurrent attributions on the secondary position of translation are challenged with a focus on the translation and invisibility of the original. Besides, creativity stands out as the dominant mode of translation and the end product actually dethrones the original with a mistranslation. This superior portrayal of the translated text is not echoed in the representation of the translator. The translator-protagonist is depicted as a weak and vulnerable character who serves as a medium of the intended/imposed change rather than as an active agent. Besides, the translator emerges as the scapegoat of the socio-political tensions who is sentenced to death in the end.

The deconstruction and reconstruction of the translated text and the translator agent are skillfully fitted into the spatial and temporal background of the novel. The reformation of Turkey in the 1920s shapes the story of the individual translator. In this regard, the author emerges as a self-expressive critic of the Kemalist reforms of the era with references to Neo-Ottoman discourse in the paratexts on *Mütercim*. Formulating the denial of Ottoman legacy as an anti-Islamic movement, he openly criticizes the policies of the period and states that this novel serves as a medium to express his thoughts on the issue. In this vein, distortion of the original, censorship of the translation, and pejorative manipulation of the translator-protagonist reverberate as a form of meta-narrative through elaborate translational and translatorial depictions. The attempts of the early Republican state to cut the bonds with the Ottoman heritage resonates the fate of the translator and the text who and which also lose ties with their past/origin.

All of these intentional and unintentional references and metaphors constitute a particular conceptualization of translation and depicts a vivid instance of *transmesis* in a transfiction. Well-formulated attributions to change, transformation, fragmentation, and dislocation in a translational process wink at contemporary readings in translation studies as a valuable case study for further research on translation in fiction in Turkish.

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