



2020

## Travel Through Translation

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### Recommended Citation

Assaad Boutros, Maribelle (2020) "Travel Through Translation," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 159.  
Available at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/159>

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## Travel Through Translation

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### **Abstract**

This is a translation of George Khabbaz's poem titled the "Story of Lebanon" from Arabic into English and Spanish. This poem depicts the country's history from its inception to Civil War hardships, and until today. It sends a powerful message to the diaspora. Today, it is crucial since Lebanon is still fighting for a change in the political system exemplified by the October 2019 revolution. This paper will address the obstacles of translation and different ways to overcome them in multiple languages. The translation process of the poem itself allowed me to dig deeper into my roots, my identity, and my country to understand the figurative language used throughout the poem. My goal in translating this poem was to provide an opportunity for those who grew up abroad, not knowing how to read or write Arabic, to understand their heritage through this poem's powerful imagery.

*Keywords:* Arabic Language and Literature, Translation Theory, Lebanon

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قصة لبنان

مرة عيطلي بيبي وقللي قرب يا ولد  
 بددي فهمك شويي عن مشاكل البلد  
 وخبرني انو جدي مرة عيطلو كمان  
 وقلو قرب لحددي بددي خبرك عن لبنان

من زمان كتير كتير الله خلق هالاكوان  
 وخلق هالبلد الصغير ونقالو اسم لبنان  
 كان جوه مثل السحر وكانت رجال رجالو  
 شو كان نظيف البحر يغسل اجرين جبالو  
 كانت العيشة حلوة والرزقة يا ماشاءالله  
 وكروم العنب بلوة وتفاحا هيك اسمالله  
 يرمي الشبكة هالصياد تطلع مليانة الشبكة  
 ما تخلص منو الاعياد الطقش الفقش والدبكة  
 وكتر ما تغرد الطيور تصوير اصواتا مبحوحة  
 والناس تنام بهالليل تاركي بوابا مفتوحة  
 صداقة حب وامان محبة نشاط وحركة  
 كان طيب الانسان ماشي وعايش عالبركة

توفى جدي هالمسكين وما كفالو الخبرية  
 ومرقت هالخبرية سنين وكفالي ياها بيبي  
 قللي فجأة مثل البرق صار بلد الازدهار  
 اسمو صار سويسرا الشرق ليلو مضوي مثل النهار  
 هالجايي وهللي رايح ليقتضي سهرات الكيف  
 يجي لعنا السايح ويبقى لآخر الصيف

العرق والكبة النية التبولة والقطايف  
 عيشة حلوة وهنية لا اديان وطوايف  
 ومنتشأوف نحنا من هون وهيدي لالنا البيوت  
 ما ضل مطرب بهالكون الا وغنى لبيروت  
 بيروت يا العيش الهني بيروت يا ست الدني  
 بيروت يا مهد الحضارة شارع سرسرق والمنارة  
 بيروت امنا الحنونة عالروشة وعالزيتونة

وكثر ما غنوا لبيروت طرقوها صبية عين  
 ما عادت تعرف بيروت القذايف عم تجي منين  
 يقعد حسن وبشارة مع بعض عخطوط التماس  
 فنجان قهوة وسيجارة يتسلوا ويحكوا عالناس  
 ولم يعطوهن اشارة ييلشوا عبعضن قواس  
 صقاً في عندو بيتين بيملكهن كل لبناني  
 بيتو الاول مدري وين والملجأ بيتو الثاني  
 وعالم صفت بلا بيوت لا ثاني ولا اولاني  
 وناس ايدو التوطين وناس احتجوا وقالوا لأ  
 وما تعرف الحق عمين وليش البلد هيك انشق  
 والحكام المرتشيين يحطوا غيرن الحق  
 جوا جيابن ملهيين ونحن عم ناكل الدق

ودخل بيناتنا الغريب وداهمتنا اسرائيل  
 هيدا خيي وهيه حبيب وهدا صهر وهيه عديل  
 المهم خربوا البلاد والامل صقاً قليل

بمية دولار البنزين تحصل منو شي قليل  
ولتحصل على الخبزات ساعة بالصف الطويل  
رجال ونسوان بهالصف بالشوبات وبالبرد  
واحد يخرقلك الصف عخصرو حامل فرد

عايام جدك يا ابني بوابنا تضللا مشروعة  
عايامي بعدا هيك بس هالمره مخلووعة  
ما بنسا هالخبرية وما بنسا بهاك اليوم  
طفا السجارة بيبي وقللي انا فايث عالنوم

بعد مدة طويلة اندهت لابني عشية  
لخبرو عالقليلة اللي خيرني ياهن بيبي  
قلتلو وقف المدفع ما عرفنا كيف ولا لاي  
ولمن وقفوا المدفع دغري قعدونا عليه  
تغلغل الطفر فينا ورافقتنا المصابيب  
حد ادنى ما بيكفيينا فوقو مندفع ضرايب  
وخبرية المدارس هاي خبرية بريق الزيت  
ابنك ليصفي دارس بدك قبل تببع البيت  
الشعب عامل كريزا والحلم صفا فيزا  
بتمنى بكرا يا ابني تكفي القصة لابنك كمان  
ما تكفيها بكندا كفيها هون ... بلبن

This poem is vocalized and can be listened to on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lb1twWelz7I>

### **The Story of Lebanon**

Once, my father called and said to me, “Come here, child.”

I want to explain a bit about the problems of this country

He told me that my grandpa once called him as well

And told him, “Come here” I want to tell you about Lebanon

A long, long time ago, God created these universes

And created this small country and named it Lebanon

Its atmosphere was like magic and its men were chivalrous

Oh, how clean the ocean was, washing the feet of its mountains

Life was beautiful, and God’s bounty was Ya Mashallah<sup>1</sup>

And the cluster of grapes plentiful and apples like this Smallah<sup>2</sup>

Fishermen would cast their nets and they would return full

The festivities never-ending; the stamping, stomping, and dabke<sup>3</sup>

Birds chirped so much that they lost their voices

People slept soundly at night with their doors wide open

Friendship, love, and security, energy and liveliness

The human was pure, walking and living on blessings

My poor grandpa passed away and did not continue the tale

This story was passed on for years and my father continued it for me

He told me, suddenly, like lightning, the country flourished

Its name became the Switzerland of the East; its nights bright as day

People coming and going to experience the nightlife

Tourists came to us and stayed until the end of summer

The Arak<sup>5</sup> and Kibbeh Nayeh<sup>6</sup>, Tabouli<sup>7</sup>, and Qatayef<sup>8</sup>

A life beautiful and wholesome, no religions or sects

We show them we are from here and these houses are ours

There was not a single singer left in the world who did not sing for Beirut

Beirut, Oh what a happy life, Beirut the lady of the world

Beirut, Oh cradle of civilization, Sursock street and the Manara lighthouse

Beirut, our nurturing mother on the Rawshe and Zaytouni

They sang so beautifully about Beirut, they gave it the evil eye

Beirut could not tell where the grenades were coming from

Hassan and Bechara would sit together on neutral ground

With a finjan<sup>4</sup> of coffee and cigarette laughing and gossiping at people

When given the signal, they began shooting at each other

Each person has two houses, every Lebanese owns them

His first house is who knows where and the second, a bomb shelter

People were left without a house neither a second nor a first

Some supported the Settlement and others protested and said NO!

Not knowing who to blame and why the country split like this

The corrupt rulers would put the blame on others

They are busy lining their pockets, while we suffer

Strangers entered among us and Israel raided us

This one's a brother, that one's a loved one and

This one's a son-in-law, that one's a brother-in-law

The important thing is that they devastated the country and hope dwindled

One-hundred dollars for gas, for which you would receive very little

To get a loaf of bread, you must wait an hour in the long line

Men and women waiting in the hot and cold

If a person cuts you in line, he is carrying a pistol on his waist

In your grandfather's times, my son, our doors were always open

In my time, it's still the same, but this time collapsed

I have not forgotten this story nor the day when

My father put out his cigarette and told me, "I'm going to bed."

After a long time, I called to my son at night

To tell him at least what my father told me

I told him the cannons stopped, we did not know how or why

And when they stopped the cannon, immediately they made us sit on it.

Poverty infiltrated us, and catastrophes accompanied us

What little we have is not enough, on top of it, we pay taxes

The story of the school is the story of the oil pitcher

For your son to be educated, first you must sell your house

The people had a seizure and the dream became to attain a visa

I hope one day, my son, you will also continue the story to your son,

Do not continue it in Canada... continue it here in Lebanon.



### Glossary

1. Ya mashallah An Arabic phrase used to mean “God Willing,” and is used to depict appreciation, joy, or thankfulness
2. Smallah An Arabic phrase used to show abundance, but also to ward off the evil eye.
3. Dabke It is an Arabic folk dance that has multiple variations depending on the region. It is mostly danced during joyous occasions such as weddings. The sound of men’s shoes stomping on the floor is symbolic of this dance.
4. Finjan A demitasse, a small cup used to serve Turkish coffee.
5. Arak A distilled spirit (40-60% alcohol) that originated in the Eastern Mediterranean and is traditionally made of grapes and aniseeds.
6. Kibbeh Nayeh Consists of minced raw lamb mixed with burglar and spices
7. Tabouli A salad made of chopped parsley, tomatoes, onion, bulgur (soaked, not cooked), and seasoned with olive oil, lemon juice, and salt.
8. Qatayef A dessert, a sweet dumpling filled with cream and nuts.
9. Settlement It refers to the issue of the Palestinian naturalization where some Lebanese were in favor of giving the Palestinians the Lebanese citizenship and some were opposed to it.

### **La Historia de Líbano**

Una vez mi padre me llamó y dijo: “Ven aquí, niño”

Quiero explicarte un poco los problemas del país

Me dijo que mi abuelo también lo llamó alguna vez y

Le dijo: “Ven aquí, quiero contarte sobre Líbano”

Desde hace mucho mucho tiempo, Dios creó el universo

Creó este pequeño país y eligió el nombre Líbano

Su atmósfera era mágica y sus hombres eran caballeros

¡Oh qué limpio era el mar! ¡Que lavara los pies de sus montañas!

La vida era linda y prospera, ¡Oh, Dios!

Un racimo abundante de uvas y manzanas como Dios lo quiso

Los pescadores arrojaban sus redes y regresaban llenas

Las fiestas sin fin, el estampado, pisando fuerte, y dabke<sup>1</sup>

Los pájaros cantaban tanto que sus voces se perdían

La gente dormía profundamente por la noche con las puertas abiertas

Amistad, amor, seguridad, energía y vivacidad

La gente era amable, caminaba y vivía el día a día

Mi pobre abuelo murió y no terminó la historia

Esta historia fue transmitida durante años y mi padre me la contó a mí

Me dijo: “De repente, como el rayo, se convirtió en un país de prosperidad

Fue conocido como la Suiza del Este; son noches brillantes como el día

La gente que venía disfrutaba el ambiente de la fiesta

Los turistas nos visitaban y se quedaban hasta el fin del verano

El Arak<sup>2</sup>, Kibbeh Nayeh<sup>3</sup>, Tabouli<sup>4</sup> y Qatayf<sup>5</sup>

Una vida bella y saludable, sin religiones ni sectas

Estamos orgullosos de nuestra tierra

No quedaba ningún cantante en el mundo que no hubiera cantado para Beirut

Beirut, ¡Oh vida celestial! Beirut ¡Oh la dama del mundo!

Beirut, ¡Oh cuna de civilización! Calle Sursock y el faro Manara

Beirut, nuestra madre amorosa en el Rawshe y Zaytoon

Cantaron tanto por Beirut que le dieron el mal de ojo

Beirut no pudo saber de dónde venían las bombas

Hassan y Bshara se sentaron juntos en la frontera

Con una taza de café y un cigarrillo, se divirtieron y hablaron de la gente

Y cuando fue el momento preciso, comenzaron a dispararse el uno al otro

Todos los libaneses tienen dos casas

Nadie sabe dónde está la primera y la segunda es el refugio antiaéreo

La gente se quedó sin casa ni segundo ni primero

Algunas personas apoyaron el régimen y otras protestaron y dijeron ¡NO!

Nadie sabe la verdad sobre quién y por qué se dividió el país

Los gobernantes estaban ocupados por dinero

Que recibieron mientras el pueblo sufría

Extraños entraron entre nosotros Israel ocupó Líbano

Eso es hermano y el otro es cariño, eso es yerno y el otro cuñado

Lo importante es que estropear el país y la esperanza fue desapareciendo

Cien dólares por gasolina, por lo que obtienes muy poca

Y para obtener una barra de pan necesitas esperar una hora en una larga fila

Hombres y mujeres están esperando en el frío y en el calor  
Si una persona te pone en la fila, es porque lleva una pistola en la cintura

En el tiempo de tu abuelo, hijo mío, nuestras puertas siempre estuvieron abiertas  
En mi tiempo, también, pero ahora están destrozadas

No he olvidado la historia ni el día en que  
Mi padre apagó su cigarrillo y me dijo: “Voy a la cama”

Después de mucho tiempo, llamé a mi hijo por la noche  
Para contarte al menos lo que me dijo mi padre  
Le dije que los cañones pararon y nunca supimos cómo ni porqué  
Y cuando pararon, inmediatamente los pusieron entre nosotros  
La pobreza llegó y las desgracias nos acompañaron  
Lo poco que tenemos no es suficiente, además pagamos impuestos  
La historia de la escuela es la historia de la lámpara de aceite  
Para que tu hijo estudie, debes vender tu casa primero  
La gente conmocionó y obtener una visa se convirtió en un anhelo  
Espero que algún día, mi hijo, también continuarás la historia a tus hijos  
No la continúe en Canadá ... continúa la aquí, en Líbano

### Glosario

1. Dabke Dabke es una palabra árabe que se refiere a un baile popular que difiere según la región. Es simbólico escuchar el zapateo de los hombres.
2. Arak Una bebida destilada (40-60% de alcohol) que se originó en el Mediterráneo Oriental y está hecha tradicionalmente de uvas y semillas de anís.
3. Kibbeh Nayeh Un plato de cordero crudo con ladrón y especias.
4. Tabouli Una ensalada hecha de perejil picado con tomate, cebolla, bulgur y sazonada con aceite de oliva, jugo de limón y sal.
5. Qatayef Un postre relleno de crema y nueces.

George Khabbaz's poem about the history of Lebanon is full of imagery, figurative language, and short phrases that depict an entire story that every parent who lived in Lebanon and experienced the war knows. As a daughter of both Lebanese parents who immigrated to the United States in the early 2000s, I am unfamiliar with some of these stories. Thankfully, I was given the opportunity to be raised in a safe environment, where my culture continued to flourish. Growing up, my parents continued to speak Arabic to me, cook traditional Lebanese foods, sing Arabic songs and dance the dabke, a Lebanese step-dance. Additionally, I grew up hearing of the tragic stories that happened during the Lebanese Civil War that lasted from 1975 to 1990. My parents lived through the war and by passing their story on from generation to generation, Lebanese history will not be lost. This is important, because unlike other countries, Lebanon's history is not recorded as historians could not agree on what to write. Historians interpreted the events differently and had their own personal biases. This makes translating this poem vital to preserving Lebanon's history.

I chose this text because it is very special to me and I found its message powerful. As I listened to it once, my friend asked me what it was saying. As the poem went on, I paused and translated as much as I could, but I felt like I was not doing the poem justice. I wanted my friend to feel the same emotional response I did. I have felt goosebumps, happiness and sorrow, while listening to this poem. I wanted to translate this poem so that my friends here at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) or anyone around the world can understand and empathize with the powerful words that describe my beautiful homeland. The Lebanese diaspora continues to grow, and I want my translation to be accessible to Lebanese people who are second and third generation immigrants.

The author, George Khabbaz was born on November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1976 in Batroun, Lebanon. He is a well-known Lebanese actor, writer, director, comedian, musician, playwright, and producer. In the last thirteen years, he has produced, directed and starred in fourteen plays,

each of which was attended by an audience of more than 100,000 spectators (*Lebanon Traveler*). He acted in both dramas and comedies. All of his plays mirror the Lebanese social issues that are occurring at the time of the play's production. His plays target issues such as the corruption of politicians, people's judgmental attitudes, stereotypes, and many more social, political, religious, and economic issues. An example would be his play at the Baalbeck International Festival in 2018. Journalists have described him and his work as something that "sends [a] message of unity," which is important in a developing country that encompasses people of different backgrounds (Euronews). Lebanon is home to people of eighteen different religious sects. It is also a home for people from Syrian, Palestinian, and Armenian backgrounds. All of these differences have created tensions in the past that have continued until today. George Khabbaz's powerful speeches, plays, and poems attempt to acknowledge these conflicts and provide an atmosphere of understanding, reflection, and resolutions to the audience.

Some difficulties of translation include phrases that are commonly used in Arabic, but do not have English equivalents. At first, my impulse was to use footnotes to describe these words, but then I realized that it would distract the reader from the text. I also felt that if a Lebanese person was reading it, then they would be knowledgeable of the food and places. Therefore, I decided to use a glossary so that people who are unfamiliar with the Lebanese culture also enjoy and understand the powerful imagery that George Khabbaz illustrates. Also, I chose to transliterate a few of the Arabic words that did not have English translations so that the poem would flow better. I then compiled them in the glossary, explaining their meaning in its entirety since words manifest in multiple layers. This is important to note because the Spanish glossary is shorter than the English one and this is because some Spanish phrases relate to Arabic phrases more closely than English. For instance, "inshallah" means

God-willing, which is not commonly used in English vernacular, while “Como Dios lo quiso,” is more common and flows well in Spanish.

Also, as I was reading it, I had to ask my father about a few of the imageries and figurative language. For example, the line, “Oh how clean the ocean was, washing the feet of its mountains,” is describing how close the two are. Lebanon’s geography is mainly tropical, but in Beirut and other coastal cities, the downward slope of the mountain reaches the sea. Another phrase I had difficulty with was the story of the oil pitcher. I asked approximately fifteen people about it and no one could tell me. I asked my cousins in Lebanon, my aunts and uncles, parents, and sisters. Everyone’s answer was the same, “I have heard of it, but not sure what it is.” Puzzled, I thought to myself, the author would not depict this in his poem if people were not familiar with it. So, I asked my Arabic professor, Dr. Dwight Reynolds, and although he is not very familiar with the Lebanese colloquial dialect, he had friends who were helpful. He emailed one of the authors of *al-Kitaab*, the textbook we use in Arabic class. Her name is Kristen Brustad and she told me that the story of the oil pitcher is a common phrase used among Lebanese people to mean a vicious cycle that never ends, a loop. The story was about a family who would buy an oil pitcher and it would break and so they would have to buy a new one and then that one would break and so on and so on. This relates to the story of the school because for a child to have a proper education, you must first sell the house, meaning it is so expensive. By selling the house it means that you have become “broke,” which is a symbolism to the story of the oil pitcher where it is repeatedly being broken and there is no solution, and the cycle repeats, from generation to generation. Although public education in Lebanon is available, it is not a sufficient education for those who want to succeed. The professors and teachers are mostly hired because of their connections and not merit. Consequently, for a child to have an education, a private institution is necessary, which is much more expensive.



During the translation process, I asked my father about numerous concepts and references that I did not comprehend. This resulted in wonderful memories, where my father would describe all of the beautiful aspects of my country, as well as the frustration with the corrupted officials. This would take place in long car rides on the way home from Santa Barbara along the coastal highway late at night. Fortunately, George Khabbaz performed his poem. Therefore, it is vocalized and can be listened to, so we did precisely that. We listened to the poem and paused on the moments I needed clarification on. This experience is evident in Gabriel García Márquez's statement that says, "translation is the closest possible reading of a text," because I have listened and read this poem multiple times before, but never gained the amount of knowledge as I did this time, while translating it. I was more aware of the symbolism, the background, and the beautifully constructed figurative language. Poetry is beautiful in the way simple images become magical.

As the translation process was coming to an end, I was not completely satisfied with my translation, but then I remembered the words of Walter Benjamin, "Translation's work is inferior to doctrine's, but it puts its mark on history no less deeply." While reading Benjamin's essay, "The Translator's Task," I was highly discouraged from translation. This quote resonated with me because I realized that no matter how much effort I put into perfecting the translation, it is incomparable to the original language, but that does not mean that it is not beautiful or significant in its own way. As I read my completed and polished translation to my classmates, they were very supportive and told me that I was capable of eliciting the same reactions to the poem in my English translation. When we went on to help another classmate with her translation, she was struggling with the sentence structure, and word for word translation. I told her that changing the sentence structure is mandatory at times for comprehension. This relates to Benjamin's statement that "word for word translation thwarts reproduction and leads to incomprehensibility," especially since some

words do not have equivalents in the target language. Struggling with this, we both realized that diction, sentence structures, and terminology had to be altered to get the meaning across.

In addition, Gloria Anzaldúa's, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," greatly influenced my thought process when translating. Her most powerful statement is, "I am my language." My language is my identity and by translating this poem, I am allowing my identity to flourish and cross borders. Translating this poem was like translating my identity; the story of where I come from and who I am. It also illuminated the reasons as to why I migrated to a land full of opportunities. It also translates many of the nostalgic feelings. Growing up, I always had trouble defining my identity. In Lebanon, I was considered an American because my views had changed. In America, I would be defined as Lebanese because of my diverse language, culture, tradition, and customs. I have come to the realization that I am both; a Lebanese American. This dual identity helped me translate this poem. I want my friends, families, classmates, professors, and coworkers to understand my background and know why I am who I am. This is the reason I decided to add a glossary. I felt as if it was the midpoint between Schleiermacher's foreignizing and domesticating strategies. On the one hand, I transliterated Arabic words into English to keep a sense of foreignization, but I also accompanied those words with a description of their meaning in the glossary, a form of domesticating. This strategy allowed the poem to flow eloquently and portray the word's full meaning.

Translating this poem, I began to feel a sense of guilt, especially in the last line. "Do not continue it in Canada... continue it here in Lebanon." The line is so powerful in that it urges the diaspora to continue this story to their children in their homeland, and not abroad. It made me think that perhaps the author did not want this translated. Perhaps the story was meant to be told in Arabic, instead of a foreign language. I believe the first step is to make it accessible to the diaspora, so they can understand the message. Since the poem's message is

only in Arabic, it is limited to the diaspora who grew up understanding the language. By making this message available to a broader spectrum of immigrants, my hope is that they realize the need to return to their homeland.

In conclusion, this poem has provided me with deep insight about my country, its histories, its current political, social, and religious issues. It is easy for someone to say that their country is the best, but many refuse to acknowledge its downfalls. George Khabbaz's poem encompasses both; he begins with the beauty of Lebanon and all it has to offer, and then shifts to the downfalls of the war and the repercussions the country perpetually deals with. This poem has allowed me to broaden my understanding of my identity, my language, and to have a deeper connection with both my family and country. With all the struggles and frustrations that went along with this translation process, it was still one of the best experiences of my life and an accomplishment I am proud of.

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