

## **Universe of Discourse in Barks' Translations of Rumi's Masnavi**

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### **Extended Abstract**

#### **1. Introduction**

Coleman Barks' (1995) translations of Rumi's works have played the largest role in Rumi's current popularity, especially among American public audience. Thus, it is very important to study how Rumi's works are represented in the target language and culture. One of the elements that is represented through translation is universe of discourse. To Lefevere (1992/1985), universe of discourse refers to the whole complex of objects, persons, concepts, ideologies, knowledge, learning and customs of a certain culture to which writers freely allude in their work. The translator's approach toward the universe of discourse of a literary work in relation to the universe of discourse of the target audience is an important factor in the representation and reception or rejection of that work in the target community. Therefore, the present research, in the first place, aimed to examine how the universe of discourse elements of the Masnavi, one of the most influential works of Rumi, are translated by Barks (1995). On the other hand, the universe of discourse elements of the Masnavi are intertwined with its poetic elements. In other words, Rumi frequently employed such poetic elements as allegory and allusion to express his Islamic mystical thoughts and ideas. Thus, this study, in the second place, attempted to know how the translator's approach in rendering the universe of discourse elements affect the poetic elements.

#### **2. Methodology**

This article concentrated on Barks' (1995) translation of one of the sections of the first book of the Masnavi entitled "The story of the person who knocked at a friend's door: his friend from within asked who he was: he said, "'Tis I," and the friend answered, "Since thou art thou, I will not open the door: I know not any friend that is 'I'" (Nicholson's corrected version, 1925, pp. 188-191, couplets 3056-3101).

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Barks (1995) has rewritten Nicholson's English translation of this section under the title of "Two Friends" (pp. 87-89) in his book *The Essential Rumi* (1995). This section is an allegory in the first seven couplets of which Rumi narrates a symbolic story on self-annihilation (fana) in the existence of God. In the remaining couplets, Rumi explains the symbolic meaning of the allegory and brings examples to familiarize the readers with the delicate points of this topic. The present article discussed and analyzed Barks' (1995) translation of the couplets containing the universe of discourse elements and examined how the translation of universe of discourse elements have affected the poetic elements.

### **3. Discussion**

The analysis of Barks' (1995) translation of Rumi's poems revealed that Barks (1995) has either omitted a great portion of universe of discourse elements of the original or removed them from their Islamic and mystical context by leaving out the references to God, excluding the Qur'anic, Islamic and mystical concepts, using neutral equivalents for Qur'anic, Islamic and mystical terms and phrases, and not identifying the sources of Qur'anic verses. In some cases, he (1995) has even changed the universe of discourse completely by conflating the poems with concepts of Taoism. The analysis also indicated that Barks' (1995) approach toward the universe of discourse elements has led to the omission of some poetic elements and the change of content of some others. The explanation of the symbolic meaning of the allegory has been compromised, and some poetic elements including allusion, inclusion (darj), adaptation, allegorical simile, and metaphor have been either omitted or changed in terms of content. Evidently, the change of universe of discourse in Barks' (1995) translation is associated with the universe of discourse of the American audience and their attitude towards religion and spirituality. Today, many Americans who have turned to Rumi are weary of organized religions and pursue the development of their souls within the realm of New Age spirituality, an individual eclectic approach to spiritual exploration that rejects religious doctrine and dogma and draws inspiration from older spiritual and religious traditions to science and philosophy.

### **4. Conclusion**

As the findings of this study revealed, Barks (1995) has decontextualized the original poems from their Islamic and mystical context and conflated them with concepts of Taoism. This way, he has created a discourse that is very much in line with New Age thinking and the spiritual needs of a wide range of American audience. In other words, Barks' (1995) approach can be interpreted in terms of adapting the universe of discourse elements of the original poems with the universe of discourse and specifically the dominant ideologies of the target community. Though Barks (1995) has found a lot of popularity among his audience, he has ignored the ethical responsibility in representing the true image of Rumi and his poems. The image

portrayed by Barks (1995) does not indicate Rumi was a Muslim mystic whose mystical thoughts and ethical teachings were rooted only in the Qur'an and Islam.

**Keywords:** Barks, Masnavi, Rumi, Translation, Universe of Discourse

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