"CHOOSE WITH CARE": AN ANALYSIS OF THE TRANSLATION OF RACIST SLANG AND NON-SLANG TERMS SUCH AS "BLACK", "DARKIE", "NIGGER", AND "NEGRO" INTO TURKISH IN ANDREA LEVY'S "SMALL ISLAND"



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Abstract

This paper analyzes the translation of racist slang and non-slang terms, including "Black," "Darkie," "Nigger," and "Negro" into Turkish in Andrea Levy's novel Small Island (2004) to show the complexities of translating the concepts that do not have Turkish equivalents and the significance of the translator's endeavour to preserve the emotional, historical and cultural value of the original text. In Small Island, Andrea Levy (1956-2019) depicts the interconnected lives of four characters - two Jamaicans, Hortense and Gilbert, and two Britons, Queenie and Bernard - grappling with themes of race, identity, and post-World War II immigration in England. For the racist comments in the novel, the words "Black," "Darkie," "Nigger," and "Negro" are used, each carrying a distinct degree of offensiveness. However, these racist phrases, such as "Darkie," "Nigger," and "Negro," which have a unique racial history in English, lack obvious Turkish equivalents because for the word "Black," only two words, "siyahi" and "zenci," which do not have offensive meanings compared to English, are used. The aim of this paper is, thus, to present how the translator, who does not pay attention to their usage in both languages, employs them arbitrarily throughout the translation process, regardless of the context. This approach fails to demonstrate the intended level of offensiveness in the original text and fails to accurately convey the same depth of meaning.

Keywords: *Andrea Levy*, Small Island, *Racist Slang Terms, Racist Non-slang Terms, "Black", "Darkie", "Nigger", "Negro", "Siyahi", "Zenci"*

Introduction

"The difference between the *almost right* word and the *right* word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning." (M. Twain, *The Art of Composition*, p. 228).

In a letter to George Bainton, American writer Mark Twain (1835-1910), with these words, draws attention to the necessity and significance of choosing the right word as an effective writing method for new writers. However, in a broader sense, it is applicable to the translation process because in order to give the meaning in the source language, the translator should choose the right word in target language, rather than almost-right. Otherwise, the translator would be unable to carry out her fundamental task. The word translation comes, etymologically, from the Latin word *translatio*, meaning "to carry across;" accordingly, Lynne Bowker argues that the task of the translator is "carrying across a message [or meaning] from one language to another" accurately (2023, p. 19). If s/he fails to select the appropriate term, it will result in a false representation of the original, or, in Twain's words, a superficial imitation of lightning, similar to a lightning bug, rather than authentic lightning, signifying a lack of depth in the translation. Unfortunately, the translation from English to Turkish of the slang and non-slang terms related to race has various complexities due to lack of their Turkish equivalents. Especially racist terminology is expressed in greater detail in English than in Turkish. For example, in English the words "Black," "Darkie," "Nigger," and "Negro" are used in relation to their racist offensive connotations while in Turkish for the word "Black," only two words, "Siyahi" and "Zenci" are used with no offensive meaning. As a British writer of Jamaican origin, Andrea Levy (1956-2019), who tries to reconstruct the British identity by drawing attention to the existence of the ignored black Britons in her novel *Small Island* (2004), pays particular attention to the use of the words "Black," "Darkie," "Nigger," and "Negro" within the novel to illustrate the marginalisation they face. However, in Emre Ağanoğlu's Turkish translation entitled *Küçük Ada*, which will be used in this study, the terms are used haphazardly, with no particular emphasis with respect to their specific usage regarding the degrees of offensiveness in the original language. In this respect, the aim of this paper is to show how such a translation that disregards the social, historical, and cultural contexts of both the source and target cultures cannot convey the same explicit message and meaning highlighted in the source text by analysing the usage of the words "Black," "Darkie," "Nigger," and "Negro" both in Andrea Levy's *Small Island* and its Turkish translation.

Andrea Levy and Her Novel *Small Island*

Levy's particular attention to the use of racist words in her novel comes from the racism that she and her family went through. As a second-generation immigrant, Levy was born in Britain in 1956 to the Caribbean Levy family who emigrated from Jamaica to London. The immigration of Caribbean people to Britain dates back to the post-war period. More specifically, after the Second World War, West Indian migration to Britain increased and the very first major emigration of the Caribbean people to the

Mother Country happened in 1948. As Kim Evelyn states, "[t]he arrival of the *Empire Windrush* carrying 492 West Indian migrants to Britain is treated as the symbolic start of this migration movement and gives this generation of Caribbean people in Britain its moniker: the *Windrush* generation" (2013, p. 130). Levy's father was among the passengers on the Empire Windrush, and her mother joined him six months later (Levy, 2000, "This Is My England"). Although this migration is the turning point in the history of multicultural Britain, Britain rejects this notion of Britishness and these non-white migrants were othered due to their skin colour. Levy is greatly affected by her parents' transition from educated middle-class individuals in Jamaica to marginalised working-class black immigrants upon their arrival in the UK. Like her family, she exposes to the harsh questioning of white people about her Britishness: "I was recently in New Zealand on a literary visit sponsored by the British Council. At a book reading, a young white man asked me, "Where are you from?" England, I replied. "You don't look English," he said. "Well, this is what English looks like sometimes," I answered. He laughed in an unconvinced sort of way. So I asked him, "What do you think an English person should look like?" He pointed to another white person - a woman with fair hair, then to himself. Both of them were born and bred New Zealanders, but somehow they were more English than me" (Levy, *This Is My England*).

Evidently, Levy becomes frustrated by the treatment she receives from a white man about her Britishness. Having experienced such events, she recognises that she is right to structure her literary career on the redefinition of British identity. Accordingly, in *Small Island*, Levy has tried to show the existence of black British identity, especially by investigating its roots, and has examined the painful process of its formation.

In her reinterpretation of the hegemonic British identity in *Small Island*, Levy emphasises the subordinate position of black individuals and carefully considers the choice of racist terminology in relation to its purpose. Prior to assessing their usage, it is helpful to understand the general subject matter addressed in the novel. In *Small Island*, Levy depicts the experiences of both Jamaican and English couples in the multicultural city of London. In this respect, the narrative centres on four principal characters: the black couple Hortense and Gilbert Joseph, immigrants from Jamaica to England, and their white landlady Queenie Bligh along with her racist husband Bernard Bligh. Each of these characters narrate the chapters of the story from their own perspectives. Throughout the novel, Hortense and Gilbert, who immigrated to London in the post-war period, narrates numerous instances of mistreatment that they subjected to due to their skin colour in England, which they consider to be their homeland. The white couple, Queenie and Bernard Bligh, demonstrates the racist understanding in society through their attitudes and words. In one of the scenes, Gilbert expresses his anger towards

the racist discrimination he is exposed to by Bernard as follows: "But you know what it make you? … It make you white. That is all, man. White. No better, no worse than me — just white. … [w]e both just finish fighting a war — a bloody war — for the better world we wan' see. And on the same side — you and me. We both look on other men to see enemy. You and me, fighting for empire, fighting for peace. But still, after all that we suffer together, you wan' tell me I am worthless and you are not. Am I to be the servant and you are the master for all time? No. Stop this, man. Stop it now. We can work together Mr Bligh. You no see? We must. Or else you just gonna fight me till the end?'" (2004, *Small Island*, p. 525).

Gilbert's conversation with Bernard actually gives the main theme of the novel. Gilbert emphasises that Caribbean nations significantly have contributed to the rise of British government by participating in World War I and World War II to defend the Mother Country. For that reason the hostile attitudes of white people towards black immigrants are nonsensical as both of them are on the same side. The conclusion of the novel suggests a symbolic reconciliation in the conflict between white and black people, when Queenie, on her knees, begs black immigrants to care for her black child (Balcı, 2024, p. 143). This baby was born as a result of an extramarital affair Queenie had with Michael Roberts, a black Jamaican aviator, when she hosted him as a lodger in her house for a few days just before he left for Canada. Interestingly enough, despite all his racist rhetoric and practices, Bernard offers to father his wife's illegitimate mulatto baby. However, Queenie knows that it is not possible for a white family to raise a black child in those years, so she wants to give her baby for adoption to the couple Hortense and Gilbert. In an era marked by severe racist discourse directed at Black individuals, requesting help from a Black person is a significant act of courage.

The Use of Racist Terms in English and Turkish and Related Examples

Before examining examples related to racist discourse in the novel, it is pertinent to provide a comprehensive explanation regarding the usage and translation of the term "black". In English, the word "black," which does not constitute an offensive meaning, is used to describe individuals belonging to the black race. However, the words "darkie," which is a derogatory and racist concept, and "nigger" and "negro," which are characterised as the expression of racist hate speech. However, these racist phrases, such as "Darkie", "Nigger", and "Negro", which have a unique racial history in English, lack obvious Turkish equivalents because for the word "Black," only two words, "Siyahi" and "Zenci", which do not have offensive meanings compared to English, are used (Balcı, 2024, p. 146)[18]. As Adem Balcı further argues, the only difference between the two is that the words are derived from different origins (2024, p. 146). The translator, who does not pay atten-

[18] The translation of the sources written in Turkish into English belongs to the author.

tion to their usage in both languages, employs them arbitrarily throughout the translation process, regardless of the context. This approach fails to demonstrate the intended level of offensiveness in the original text and fails to accurately convey the same depth of meaning. For example, for the word "Black," the translator uses the terms "Siyahi" or "Zenci," which do not have offensive meanings. Thus, the use of the word "Black" in the translation is not so complicated. However, the translation of the words "Darkie," "Nigger" and "Negro" is rather problematic which is examined in the examples below:

> **Example 1 for the Translation of "Darkie":** "Oi, darkie, show us yer tail" (2004, *Small Island*, p. 140). "Hey siyah kuyruğunu göstersene" (2006, *Küçük Ada*, p. 133).

The problematic translation of the term "Darkie" is presented in the scene where Gilbert is exposed to the mocking of white English children due to his skin colour, which causes his questioning of his British identity. One of the West Indian RAF volunteers, Gilbert goes to the Mother Country where he is exposed to racism. His love for England is influential in his desire to go there to help because, like other West Indians, Gilbert was raised by his parents to have a deep admiration for England. Thus, when one day he hears "Mother calling" because "she is troubled" and she needs help, he leaves home immediately to protect her (2004, *Small Island*, p. 139). However, from the very beginning, he is disappointed by the mistreatment of the white people. Even children mock him due to his skin colour. When he goes out from the camp with other Jamaican soldiers on their first day in England, English children, who surround them, yell out at him a "darkie" with a "tail." Frustrated by the treatment he gets, Gilbert wants to ask just one question to the Mother: "how come England did not know [and insult] me?" (2004, *Small Island*, p. 141). In this context, it is clear that the darkie is used as an insulting racist expression. The white children insult him by associating the black man with an animal. However, as for its Turkish translation, the translator translates the term "Darkie" by using the word "Black" without considering the insulting aim of the source text writer.

> **Example 2 for the Translation of "Darkie":** "Good. Well, give me a knock and I'll let you know when I'm ready to go out … It's all right. I don't mind being seen in the street with you. You'll find I'm not like most. It doesn't worry me to be seen out with darkies" (2004, *Small Island*, p. 231). "Güzel. Pekala, dükkanlara gitmek için kapımı çalman yeterli … Önemli değil. Sokakta seninle birlikte görülmek beni rahatsız etmez. Başkalarına benzemediğimi anlayacaksın. Sokakta siyahlarla birlikte görülmek beni rahatsız etmiyor" (2006, *Küçük Ada*, pp. 215-16).

In the example given above, it is clear that the source text of *Small Island* gives particular attention to the use of the racist slang phrase "Darkie". The insulting usage of the word "Darkie" is given in the conversation between

Queenie and Hortense. Soon after Hortense moves into Queenie's house, the latter pays an uninvited visit to the former. She enters without waiting for an invitation which causes Hortense think she is rude. As it is Hortense's first day in England, Queenie offers her to go shopping which can be accepted as a friendly attitude towards a black woman. However, Queenie says that "I don't mind being seen in the street with you. You'll find I'm not like most. It doesn't worry me to be seen out with darkies" (2004, *Small Island*, p. 231). Although with these words, Queenie clearly presents society's racist point of view towards black people, Hortense cannot make sense of it and questions the reason behind this woman's worry to be seen in the street with her. Accordingly, she states that "[a]fter all, I was a teacher and she was only a woman whose living was obtained from the letting of rooms. If anyone should be shy it should be I. And what is a darkie? (2004, *Small Island*, p. 231). In the source text, the term "Darkie" is evidently employed as a derogatory racial utterance. The writer of the source text particularly uses the word "Darkie" in order to emphasise the racism that black people have been exposed to throughout history. However, the translator in the Turkish version translates it as "Black" through which he emphasises just the skin colour. However, in the source text, the writer underlines not only the skin colour but also the connotations, such as "worthless" and "slave," which are given with the skin colour. Thus, deprecating remarks are not given with the word "Black," so the exact meaning in the source text cannot be perceived.

Example 3 for the Translation of "Darkie": "Yeah, you, darkie. We're talking to you" (2004, *Small Island*, p. 334). "Evet, sen, zenci. Seninle konuşuyoruz" (2006, *Küçük Ada*, p. 312).

Another problematic translation of the term "Darkie" is presented in the scene where the English men leaning against the wall makes fun of Hortense. Hortense goes out with Queenie to learn the ways of shops. After they leave one of the shops, Queenie notices the men's perving on Hortense and panics and tells Hortense to keep walking without looking back. However, Hortense asks one of the men, "Are you talking to me?" (*Small Island* 334). Men reply to Hortense, "Yeah, you, darkie. We're talking to you" (334). Although the word "Darkie" is here used with a very offensive aim, the Turkish translator translates it as "Zenci", which is a term previously used in the translation of the phrase "Black" without derogatory meaning only to represent the skin colour. In that scene, in front of a shop, the finger of a small blond child straight at Hortense and he yells out to attract his mother's notice: "Look! She's black. Look, Mum, black woman?" (2004, *Small Island*, p. 334) / "Bak! Kadın zenci. Anne, bak, zenci bir kadın" (2006, *Küçük Ada*, p. 311). His mum warns him not to point at her like that because the black person can feel humiliated. Both instances demonstrate that the translator em-

ploys the same Turkish term, "Zenci", to convey two distinct meanings. Making such a haphazard word choice in translation shows that the translator is not faithful to the original text.

> **Example 4 for the Translation of "Darkie":** "According to this darkie I could not just come into *his* room. Somehow I needed *his* permission. I think not" (2004, *Small Island*, p. 470). "Bu siyah herife göre onun odasına öylece giremezmişim. Ne tuhaf şeydir ki, ondan izin almam gerekiyormuş. Ben pek de öyle düşünmüyordum" (2006, *Küçük Ada*, p. 438).

In its Turkish translation, the translator again ignores the intended meaning in the source text by translating the racist slang word "Darkie" as "Siyah." Bernard goes into Gilbert's house as the landlord. Bernard, who observes Gilbert's surprise at his unauthorised entry into the room, contends that obtaining permission from a "Darkie" is unnecessary. As a white man, he is the master; conversely, as a black man, Gilbert is the slave. As the mouthpiece of racist society, Bernard uses the word "Darkie" consciously to humiliate black people. For him, "[e]veryone had a place. England for the English and the West Indies for these coloured people" (2004, *Small Island*, p. 469). Therefore, when these so-called "darkies" leave the Mother Country, the problem will be solved. Within this context, making a translation without considering the aim of the author of the source text causes the deep meaning in the original text not to be conveyed.

As can be seen in four examples examined above, Levy especially chooses the word "Darkie", which is used in an insulting and racist way. Unfortunately, in the Turkish translation of the novel, the translator chooses the words "Siyahi" or "Zenci", which have the same meaning as the word "Black" in English but without insulting or racist implications in Turkish. However, the source text clearly indicates that the translation should also convey a sense of insult. Otherwise, the translator cannot convey Levy's intended message, resulting in a loss of meaning.

Another word that reveals the problematic usage of the translator is "Nigger." In the original text, "Nigger" is used to express racial hatred, but the translator translates it as "Zenci" which does not have the meaning of racial hatred in Turkish.

> **Example 1 for the Translation of "Nigger":** "This man was still looking down at me. I could feel the blood rising in my face, turning me crimson, as he smiled a perfect set of pure blinding white teeth. The inside of his mouth was pink and his face was coming closer and closer to mine. He could have swallowed me up, this big nigger man" (2004, *Small Island*, p. 6). "Adam hâlâ başını eğmiş, bana bakıyordu. Kör edici beyazlıktaki kusursuz dişleriyle bana gülümserken, yüzümü kan bastığını, pancar gibi kızardığımı hissedebiliyordum. Ağzının içi pembeydi, yüzü de yavaş yavaş yüzüme yaklaşıyordu. Bu kocaman zenci beni yutabilirdi" (2006, *Küçük Ada*, p. 12).

In the "Prologue," where little Queenie's visit to the British Empire Exhibition is narrated, Queenie's first encounter with the black man is explored. Queenie sets out with her parents to go to the British Empire Exhibition, and on their trip, she meets a black man and describes her fearful feelings by classifying the black man as "big nigger man" who will swallow her up. Her view on black people originates from her upbringing, during which she was told that they were uncivilised and "other". In fact, the class system in Jamaica played an important role in the Levy family's upbringing and education (Levy, "Back to My Own Country"). Levy's family was proud of the fact that they considered themselves close to the white class because of their light skin colour. However, when the Levy family, who considered themselves superior to those with darker skin, went to England, they were shocked. The reason for this is that, despite their light skin colour, they were categorised as "Black", "Darkie", and even "Nigger" and "Negro", leading them to recognise their status as the marginalised outsider. In the aforementioned example, Levy, well-versed in the usage of disparaging language in society, especially selects the term "Nigger", a manifestation of racist hate speech, which underscores the uncivilised nature of this phrase. However, the Turkish translator translates the term "Nigger" as "Zenci" through which he cannot give the meaning of racial hatred presented in the source text.

Example 2 for the Translation of "Nigger":

"This is England," I [Gilbert] said. "This is not America. We do not do this in England. I will sit anywhere I please."
"Well, we do it here. It's the rules. All niggers—" She stopped and began again. "All coloureds up the back rows."
"Why?" Queenie asked.
"Because that's their seats."
"No! Why do coloured people have to sit where you say?"
"Our other customers don't like to sit next to coloureds."
"Who are these other customers? Yanks?" I [Gilbert] asked.
"They won't sit next to you."
"What other customers? Who?" I was shouting now.
"They don't like to be all mixed up."
"Americans?"
"Not just Yanks. Anyone" (2004, *Small Island*, pp. 184-85).

"Burası İngiltere," dedim. "Amerika değil. İngiltere'de bu yapılmaz. Canım nereye isterse oraya otururum".
"Eh, biz burada böyle yapıyoruz. Kurallar böyle. Bütün zenciler…" – burada susarak söze tekrar başladı - "bütün siyahlar arka sıralarda oturur."
Queenie, "Neden?" diye sordu.
"Çünkü onların yeri orası".
"Hayır! Neden siyahlar sizin istediğiniz yerlere otursun ki?"
"Diğer müşterilerimiz siyahlarla yan yana oturmak istemiyor".
"Kimmiş şu diğer müşteriler? Yankiler mi? Diye sordum.

"Senin yanına oturmazlar".
"Hangi diğer müşteriler? Kim? Bağırıyordum artık.
"Sizin aranıza karışmak istemiyorlar".
"Amerikalılar mı?"
"Sadece onlar değil. Herkes" (2006, *Küçük Ada*, pp. 172-73).

In this particular example, the Turkish translator translates "Nigger" as "Zenci." However, when seen in context, such a translation is insufficient to express the intended meaning of the source text's author because the author's objective is to highlight the racial animosity directed towards black individuals. In the cinema, Queenie and Gilbert encounter a significant problem when the usherette orders Gilbert to move to the back seats due to his racial identity by categorising him as "Nigger." Gilbert is furious and unable to perceive why they are prohibited from watching a film in the front row just due to their skin colour. While they are quarrelling, one of the customers yells out: "Hey, nigger, I said sit where the lady tells ya" (2004, *Small Island*, p. 186) / "Baksana zenci, sana hanımefendinin gösterdiği yere geç dedim" (2006, *Küçük Ada*, p. 174). It is clear that Levy chooses the word "Nigger" in particular in order to give the meaning of racial hatred, but since the translator only translates it as "Black" or "Zenci", it does not have the same effect on the reader. In examining the prior instance of the term "Nigger" alongside this example, it can be asserted that the translator endeavoured to employ the term "Zenci" in a more pejorative context. However, a comprehensive review of the translation reveals the translator's inconsistency, as the terms "Black" and "Darkie" are both translated as "Zenci" in some contexts.

Similar to the slang phrase "Nigger", the original text employs the term "Negro" to signify racial hatred and disparagement; however, it is translated blandly as "Black", which lacks any connotation of hostility.

Example 1 for the Translation of "Negro": "We were allowed to live with white soldiers, while the inferior American negro was not. I was perplexed. No, we were all perplexed. We Jamaicans, knowing our island is one of the largest in the Caribbean, think ourselves sophisticated men of the world" (2004, *Small Island*, p. 131). "Aşağı derecedeki siyah Amerikalıların tersine, beyaz askerlerle birlikte yaşama hakkımız vardı. Biz Jamaikalılar, adamızın Karayipler'in en büyük adalarından biri olduğunu bildiğimizden, kendimizi görmüş geçirmiş insanlar sayarız" (2006, *Küçük Ada*, pp. 124-25).

In the section "Before," Gilbert, who is subjected to racist hatred, does the same thing when talking about American people by classifying them as "Negro." In order to justify himself, Gilbert uses hate speech about American people and shows himself superior to them. Unfortunately, the meaning in the original text is not given again as the translator uses the word "Black" for the word "Negro". In this respect, Ana Helena Souza argues that two

texts should be "intrinsically connected"; otherwise, it results in a "loss of autonomy" (2006, p. 50).

Example 2 for the Translation of "Negro": "One of an old negro man standing formally in front of a house. Looking to all the world like a chimpanzee in clothes, this lord of the manor stood behind a seated black woman with white hair and a face as grumpy as Monday morning" (2004, *Small Island*, pp. 302-3). "Bir tanesi bir evin önünde durmuş yaşlı, siyah bir adama aitti. Etrafına elbise giymiş bir şempanze gibi bakan malikâne sahibi bu adam, sandalyeye oturmuş beyaz saçlı ve pazartesi sabahları kadar aksi suratlı siyah bir kadının arkasında duruyordu" (2006, *Küçük Ada*, p. 281).

As demonstrated in the example above, another usage of the phrase "Negro" is narrated by Queenie who has a sexual relationship with a black man called Sergeant Michael Roberts, Hortense's distant cousin and love interest. She looks at a battered leather wallet that Michael likely mislaid or forgot in his rush to get away. In her description in the photographs inside it, she likens "an old Negro man" to "a chimpanzee in clothes," while she identifies a woman, another person in the photo, with her physical appearance by stating, "a black woman with white hair" (2004, *Small Island*, pp. 302-3). As for its Turkish translation, for both the terms "Negro" and "Black", the translator opts for "Black", which shows how he disregards the specific meaning the author intends to convey.

To conclude, the translation of racist slang and non-slang terms, including "Black", "Darkie", "Nigger", and "Negro" into Turkish in Andrea Levy's novel *Small Island* (2004) has complexities. In order to pay attention to the issue of racism in the process of adaptation to the emerging hybrid British identities, Levy chooses the words "Black", "Darkie", "Nigger," and "Negro" respectively, in relation to the degrees of offence. However, these racist phrases, such as "Darkie", "Nigger", and "Negro," which have a unique racial history in English, lack obvious Turkish equivalents because for the word "Black", only two words, "Siyahi" and "Zenci," which do not have offensive meanings compared to English, are used. Therefore, the Turkish translator's endeavour to preserve the emotional, historical and cultural value of the original text is significant. Unfortunately, the novel's translator, who does not pay attention to their usage in both languages, employs them arbitrarily throughout the translation process, regardless of the context although he should choose the words with care. This approach fails to demonstrate the intended level of offensiveness in the source text and fails to accurately convey the same depth of meaning. In order to solve the problem, if the translator cannot recreate any Turkish equivalents for these racist slang and non-slang terms or use any appropriate translation strategy, he can keep the English words the same in translation by expressing their offensive degrees in a footnote.

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