The Translator and an Analysis of Its Optimism
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"I looked behind me, far down to the sand, and could see no children's bodies, no women's bodies, on the sand or between the huts or trees. A very good view, under my circumstances" (58).

This observation is delivered by Daoud Hari, author of The Translator, after his village is destroyed. His home and possessions are reduced to blackened sticks and smoldering grasses. Right now, his people are dazed by the sudden destruction of their homeland; all they can do is flee and regroup once outside the reach of Sudanese troops. Once they realize the reality of the situation, they will become hysterical. Mothers will grieve for their dead children. Women, ravaged by Janjaweed horsemen, grieve for their future children. And, as Daoud witnesses this, as he helps survivors escape into the mountains, he thinks this is not so bad, at least not as bad as it could be.

Daoud concludes his view with "...under my circumstances." I was affected by this powerful three-word phrase because it seems to give him license to view events with an almost superhuman ability to see the bright side of this dark landscape. Daoud's optimistic viewpoint carries throughout The Translator as a compelling theme that goes beyond hope and verges upon a greater survival instinct. I am drawn into his optimism with incredulous fascination rather than in heroic emulation. I hesitate to recommend it as a valid technique, yet I cannot deny his successful outcome; Daoud Hari survived.

The dictionary (Optimism, 1981) defines optimism as "an inclination to put the most favorable construction upon actions and events or to anticipate the best possible outcome; a doctrine that this world is the best possible world." Being optimistic, in the typical sense of the
word, ultimately means one expects the best possible outcome from any given situation. While any character trait can be largely debatable, most researchers agree that optimism seems to be a biological trait, but it is also thought that optimism has more to do with environmental factors, making it a largely learned trait (Vaughan, 2000). Vaughan, after examining the origins of optimism in early childhood, further states that “…optimism is a process [not a state] that is within the grasp of everyone.”

This research leads me to question whether the premise that optimism is always a good thing is a valid assumption to assert. Consider that Daoud has less of a “choice” about his optimistic viewpoint than is at first apparent. He may have inherited an innate sense of this survival mechanism that was further compounded by the environmental need for it to develop. Even with a gun pressed against his temple and his life potentially ending in seconds, Daoud calmly instructs his friend to stand away, as to avoid the resulting spray of brain and blood. To me, Daoud’s sense of optimism is as admirable as it is irrational. I understand that in the face of adversity, Daoud’s survival requires him not to succumb to the effects of personal loss. I understand that grieving is a luxury reserved for when one is not being shot at. However, does his predicament dictate the biological or environmental necessity of being optimistic to the point of imprudence?

A study, conducted by David Robinson and Manju Puri, of Duke University (2007) suggests that “…overoptimism, like overconfidence, may in fact lead to behaviors that are unwise.” Daoud, trapped in his overwhelming circumstance, turns to optimism as his survival mechanism and often as his tool to comfort others where some type of heightened level of reactionary response is required. It is the most he can do. It is the best he can do.
Often, however, the only consolations he can offer is that the departed are in a better place, and that their suffering is over, “You are still alive, they didn’t kill you” (Hari, 83). Such trite responses are inadequate yet they fill a void. But, there are simply too many stories, too much pain, and too many voices to be heard. What more painful a job than that of a translator, who must listen to horror stories, convert them, and then share them with others.

Daoud Hari showed moral conviction and action as he persevered with this remarkable service as his way to right some of the wrong as evidenced by his words, “I would say that these ways to die and suffer are unspeakable, and yet they were spoken: we interviewed 1,134 human beings over the next weeks; their stories swirled through my near-sleepless nights” (84).

He framed his story in the voice of optimism to show that the people of Africa deserve better, that it is a country that is in fact worth saving. “For it has no meaning to take risks for news stories unless the people who read them will act” (182). This is a story of survival and Hari owes them life.
Works Cited


