

**Arabic Fiction in English Translation:
A Translator-oriented perspective
By**

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ملخص

الرواية العربية المترجمة الى الانجليزية من منظور المترجم

تهدف هذه المقالة الى ابرز اهم التحديات التي تواجهها الرواية العربية المترجمة الى الانجليزية . و تركز على المسيرة المهنية لخمسة مترجمين غربيين معروفين ، و ذلك من خلال البحث في تجربتهم في هذا الميدان ، و كيف ساهم هؤلاء في تشكيل الذوق الادبي لدى القارئ الغربي و بالتالي خلق نموذج من الكتابة يمهّد تسويقها. و تدخل هذه المقالة في اطار ما يسمى بسوسولوجيا الترجمة، حيث تعتبر اداة من ادوات الهيمنة الثقافية ، و هي احدى اهم الاستنتاجات التي تتمحور حولها هذه المقالة.

Abstract

The present article seeks to explore some of the major facets of and challenges in the area of Arabic fiction in English translation. It looks into the professional lives of some five well-established western translators, digs into their experience in the field, the interviews they gave, the debates they engaged in, all with a view to highlighting some of the key characteristics of Arabic literature in translation as they have shaped up in the last couple of decades or so. To this end, the paper operates within what has come to be labeled as 'Translator Studies, an area of research that initially took shape in the 1990's (within the framework of a sociology of translation), but is still burgeoning, though in some cases

even lacking, especially with regards to research on Arabic literary production in English. The gist of the argument informing the paper is that individual translators, regardless of their intent behind their translations, are social agents that contribute, despite everything, to the upkeep of cultural hegemony and power structure.

Key words: Culture, agency; sociology of translation; translator; Arabic fiction.

1. *Translator Studies*: some preliminary notes

The present paper seeks to gauge the status of Arabic fiction in English translation through tracing the professional lives and ideas of some five Western translators who have been quite regularly involved, and for many years now, in the translation of Arabic fiction into English. It finds substance in the hitherto neglected, but slowly emerging nonetheless, area of focus that has come to be labeled by Andrew Chesterman as *Translator Studies*,¹ an area of inquiry that purports to highlight the role of the translator as an invaluable agent in the translation industry. According to Chesterman, a straightforward definition of *Translator Studies* would be

the study of translators (and of course interpreters). Of course, all research on (human) translations must surely at least imply that there are indeed translators behind the translations, people behind the texts. But not all translation research takes these people as the primary and explicit focus, the starting point, the central concept of the research question. (pp. 13-14)

¹ "Within the field of Translation Studies we may be witnessing the development of a new subfield, a new branch. I suggest we could call this TranslatOR Studies," says Andrew Chesterman in his article *The Name and Nature of Translation Studies* (p. 13), where, building upon the notion of 'social agency' he sets up a framework that moves away from a prescriptive, source-text oriented stance in Translation Studies, as and focuses instead on the individual as well as social role of the translator, a stance which could be placed within the framework of Gideon Toury's target-oriented approach, as explained in his *Descriptive Translation Studies-and beyond*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing Company, 1995 (pp. 53-69).

As such, the focus on the role of the translator in the practice of translation is very much in keeping with the wider context of the sociology of translation, which explicitly places translators at the core of its research model.² Along this line of thought, one could safely argue that the practice of translation is a social act, not the mere rendition of one particular language (SL) into another (TL), as J.L. Catford would have it. Indeed, an in-depth research of what really goes into translation is likely to reveal that as such the practice of translation revolves around four major pillars: textual, cognitive, cultural and sociological. According to Chesterman, the fourth pillar

deals with translators'/interpreters' observable behaviour as individuals or groups or institutions, their social networks, status and working processes, their relations with other groups and with relevant technology, and so on. (p. 19)

The focus of attention in the sociological pillar on such factors as status, social network and relations with other groups is, be it noted, in sync with Henry Lefevere's three-dimensional components of the patronage³ system obtaining in professional translation: the status, economic and ideological components. Both scholars indeed reckon with the primacy of translators themselves, for translators tend, unconsciously or not, to leave their traces (cultural/sociological) on the translation, and their work dispositions (cognitive/'habitus') are often enmeshed with the words on the pages of their translations (textual).

² Michaela Wolf, a high-profile scholar in the area of translation sociology, for instance, describes this situation in her article on "the Emergence of a Sociology of Translation" in *Constructing a Sociology of Translation* in these terms:

Any translation, as both an enactment and a product, is necessarily embedded within social contexts. On the one hand, the act of translating, in all its various stages, is undeniably carried out by individuals who belong to a social system; on the other, the translation phenomenon is inevitably implicated in social institutions, which greatly determine the *selection, production and distribution* of translation and, as a result, the strategies adopted in the translation itself. (Wolf and Fukari, eds: 200: p. 8; *emphasis added*)

What emerges from such a viewpoint is that translators, crucial as they are, need to be saved from their 'invisible' (and therefore ancillary) status, and viewed afresh as social and political agents. See also *Part 2: Empowering Translators* of Maria Tymoczko, *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators* (pp. 187-216) for a post-colonial view of the power and political agency of translators.

³ Patronage, as André Lefevere argues in *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literature*, is a control factor that operates beyond the confines of a literary system, and is meant to be understood as "something like the powers (persons, institutions) that can further or hinder the reading, writing, or rewriting of literature." (p. 15) See chapter 2 in particular.

More importantly, translators oftentimes serve as patrons who play a crucial role in setting the standards for translation practice, as suggested in note 2 above; they partake of the process of selecting what texts to be translated, and are somehow or other involved in the power structures that control the production and consumption of translations. As such, it is imperative that Translation Studies be attuned to the role of translators; namely, as *agents* whose “activities or attitudes, [their] interaction with their social and technical environment, or their history and influence” can be revelatory of the nature and evolution of translation practice within any culture.⁴

It is within this context, cursory as it is though, that the present paper will attempt to pin down some of the major socio-historical points that Arabic fiction in English translation has gone through, a translator-focused approach that, as far as I can determine, has not been adopted at any length elsewhere. It will do so through giving voice to the translators themselves, laying out their translation experience (their ‘habitus,’ in Bourdieu’s term)⁵, the challenges they had to deal with, the power structures they operated within, as well as other no less important elements such as the debates they engaged in, the interviews they gave, and the critical reviews that their translations received.

The point of departure to get started on the path of investigating the key socio-historical moments in Arabic translation will inescapably be the oft-quoted incident that the late Edward

⁴ Paradoxically, very little extensive research has been carried out in connection with the power of agency and what it means in Translation Studies, especially in connection with Arabic fiction in English translation. Indeed, our research in this area has led us to a very limited number of works that deal with the subject of agency in translation, and in practically all of them, the treatment of agency in the Arab context is dear. See, for example, the research conducted by Milton and Bandia in *Agents of Translation* (2009) on literary activity in Japan, Brasil and Turkey; Abdallah, Kristina *Translators in Production Networks: Reflections on Agency, Quality and Ethics*. Joensuu: University of Eastern Finland (2012), on Finnish literature in English, and Haddadian Moghaddam, Esmaeil. *Agency in the Translation and Production of Novels from English in Modern Iran*. Tarragona: Universitat Rovira i Virgili, (2102).

Said regretfully describes in his essay “*Embargoed Literature*,” which was first published in *The Nation* (1990), and has been reproduced in the collection of essays titled *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination* (chapter 36), an essay in which Edward Said, be it noted at the outset, recounts an experience where a publisher solicited a list of novels that Said would recommend be translated from Arabic. In response, Said offered the publisher a list of Arab authors, Naguib Mahfuz included, that he thought were ‘eligible,’ so to say, for publication. The list was discarded, and none of the authors suggested was taken in for publication, as Edward Said was made to know shortly after by the publisher. In fact, when Said inquired why none had subsequently been translated, he was told that “Arabic is a controversial language” (*Embargoed*, chapter 36). Ever since this incident, the state of Arabic fiction in English translation has fluctuated, witnessing as it has moments of maturity at certain points in history, as well as moments of decadence. The present paper will seek to provide some of the reasons why this is the case.

2. Arabic fiction in English Translation: A field in Custody

Without further ado, I will in what follows provide what I deem are noteworthy biographical notes on some of the major agents/translators of Arabic literary texts, examining in the process their thoughts on and views about the translation of Arabic works of fiction, and the practice of translation in general, the ultimate objective being to pin down some of the key threats and weaknesses of Arabic fiction in English translation and, by the same token, look into the role that these translators have played as social agents in releasing Arabic literary production from the embargo it has been subject to.

Note that for the purposes of this study, we have chosen to select five major translators of Arabic literary works, especially fictional ones, into English. Our selection depends primarily on the criterion of frequency, which we deem to be amenable to a fair treatment of the many translators who have at their capital the experience of having translated at least one Arab fictional text. The translators/agents that will be presented here have truly contributed each in their own way to the enrichment of literary translation, and more specifically to the field of cultural production in the Arab world. They will be considered in the following order: 1- Denys Johnson-Davies, 2- Roger Allen, 3- Richard Jacquemond, 4-Hupmhrey Davis, and 5- Marilyn Booth. For reasons of space, other translators such as LeGassic and Henri Theroux will not be considered, though their contribution is equally significant.⁶

One of the pioneers in the translation of fictional works from Arabic into English is undeniably Denys Johnson-Davis. David Tresilian, for instance, maintains in his *A Brief Introduction to Arabic Literature* (2008) that Johnson-Davies is “probably the best-known translator of modern Arabic literature into English” (p. 23). Richard Jacquemond is an amazing scholar and translator who masters the Arabic language, writes in French and in English. Humphrey Davis has contributed as a translator of Arabic texts, fiction, historical and classical texts. Last but not least, Marilyn Booth is a translator whose interest area relates to Arab women writers, women readership, translation and the discourse of publishing.

Denys Johnson-Davies, to begin with, is a distinguished Arabic-English literary translator who has been described by the late author and literary critic Edward Said (1995: 377) as “the leading Arabic-English translator of our time” in *The Independent* of London in 1990, a prolific

⁶ It is worth noting that most of the well-known translators have won a reputation thanks to their translation of Naguib Mahfuz’s fiction. Also, with the exception of Marilyn Booth, all of the above-listed translators have translated at least one novel by Naguib Mahfouz.

translator who exposed Western readers to the diversity of contemporary Arabic literature in a series of important anthologies. These included “*Egyptian Short Stories*” (1978), “*Under the Naked Sky: Short Stories from the Arab World*” (2001) and “*The Anchor Book of Modern Arabic Fiction*” (2006), to name but a few of such translations.

Naguib Mahfouz, with whom Denys Johnson had spent many years of friendship, says in his foreword to Denys Johnson-Davies’ *Memories in Translation: a Life between the Lines of Arabic Literature* that

Denys Johnson-Davies, whom I have known and admired since 1945, was the first person to translate my work—a short story—and he has since translated several books of mine, so I owe him a special debt of gratitude. In fact, he has done more than anybody to translate modern Arabic fiction into English and promote it. (2006: p. v)

Johnson-Davies was, for many years, the only Arabic-English translator of Arabic fiction. In his *Memoirs* (p. 12), he says that when he arrived to Egypt in 1945, he found out that in circulation was a literature that “nobody [in the Anglophone world] knew about” and this is what attracted him to it, but had to shy away from embarking on a career in translation, preferring as he did to take ‘odd’ jobs as an employee at the British Council (in the 1940s), a teacher of English and translation at the British Institute.

It was a time when Denys-Johnson’s habitus, to use Bourdieu’s term, was limited in scope, and definitely incapable of changing the course of literary production from Egypt to the Western World, especially because, for a long time, people believed that nothing could come out of the Arab world. As William Grimes put it in *The New York Times* of 5 July 2017:

It was an uphill climb. Interest in the literature of the Arab world was virtually nil. Two decades ⁷ elapsed between the publication of “*Tales from Egyptian Life*” and “*Modern Arabic Short Stories*,” which Oxford University Press agreed to take on only if Mr. Johnson-Davies found a prominent academic to write the introduction.

He therefore obligingly had to appeal to one of his old professors at Cambridge University, with whom he was not really in good terms, as he declares in a discussion he had about Translating and Naguib Mahfouz at the American university at Cairo, which was published on Youtube on 29 May 2011. In addition, Johnson-Davies has to his credit, among other, a large number of short stories, novels, plays, and poetry by modern Arab authors. He has in fact produced more than thirty volumes of translation of modern Arabic literature, including *The Essential Tawfiq Al Hakeem* (AUC Press 2008), *The Essential Yusuf Idris* (AUC Press, 2009), as well as *The Essential Naguib Mahfouz*. After converting to Islam and taking up the name Abdul Wadud, he translated three volumes of hadith, or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. In 1999, Quartet Books published a collection of his own writing for adult readers, “*Fate of a Prisoner and Other Stories*.” And his most recent work of translation, “*Homecoming: 60 Years of Egyptian Short Stories*,” was published by the American University in Cairo Press in 2012.

In his conclusive statement for his captivating *Memories in Translation*, Denys Johnson-Davis says:

The early Arabs, it seems, showed greater appreciation for their translators; it is recorded that in early Abbasid times the famous Honein ibn Ishaq was paid a handsome monthly salary and that the caliph Ma'mun rewarded him with the weight in gold of the books he had translated. I find myself stressing in that 1946 article, as I do today, that translation is not simply a matter of putting one word in place of another. It is an art, and, as someone once said: “Nothing moves without translation.” (p. 130)

⁷ Indeed, twenty years elapsed between Johnson-Davis first translation of *Tales From Egyptian Life* (1947) and *Modern Arabic Short Stories* (Heinemann, 1967), the publication of which Johnson-Davis had to pay for with his own money, as he declares in an interview posted on Youtube on 29 May 2011.

Whether the modern Arabs, so to speak, show nowadays any appreciation for translation practice is a question that we will hope to show through introducing the other scholars of Arabic translation, without whom, be it admitted, Arabic literature in English would have stagnated farther backstage than it is now on the world literary scene.

Another outstanding scholar/translator is Dr. Roger Allen, a Professor of Social Thought and Comparative Ethics in the School of Arts & Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania, where he had spent upwards of 40 years before his retirement. Professor Allen holds what is actually the oldest professorial post in Arabic Studies in the United States. He obtained his doctoral degree in modern Arabic literature from Oxford University in 1968, the first student to obtain a doctoral degree in that field at Oxford.

As far as his translations are concerned, Professor Allen has to his credit a collection of novels and short stories by Mahfouz e.g. *Autumn Quail* (1985), *Mirrors* (1st edition, 1977; 2nd edition 1999), *Karnak Café* (2007), *Khan al-Khalili* (2008) and *One Hour Left* (2010) and by many Arab writers such as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *The Ship* (1985) and Yusuf Idris, *In The Eye of the Beholder* (1978). Also, he translated some nine novels by different Moroccan writers, among which are BenSalim Himmich, *The Polymath* (2004, *al-'allama*), and *The Theocrat* (*Majnun Al-Hukm*, 2005); Ahmad al-Tawfiq, *Abu Musa's Women Neighbors* (2006), to name but three.

In addition to the translation of a number of other fictional works, Dr. Allen has written many books about the Arabic novel and literature, some of which have been extremely well-received. One should cite here *The Arabic Literary Heritage* (1998), an Arabic version of which was published in Cairo as *Muqaddima li-al-Adab al-'Arabi* (2003). The *Introduction* was

considered as the standard work in the field of Arabic literature, according to *Banipal Magazine* (2013). An equally interesting book is his *The Arabic Novel: an Historical and Critical Introduction* (1st edition 1982, Arabic edition, 1986; 2nd edition 1995, 2nd Arabic edition 1998). This book has been widely used throughout the world as an introduction to the novel genre in the Arab world.

In terms of academic performance, it was in fact during the sixties that Dr. Allen chose, as an undergraduate at Oxford, initially to major in the Classics, but soon gravitated towards studying Arabic. This was a period when the Arab world was going through a tumultuous period in its history, “a decade of confusion, a decade of numerous huge projects and the abolition of almost all political activities; massive industrialization and the absolute absence of freedom,” as Sabry Hafiz describes it in *The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties*.⁸ As regards literary output, this period certainly left its mark on fictional writing in the Arab world, as many Arab authors back then sought to express the complexities of the period in their fictional writing, and it was during this rich period in the literary history of the Arabs that Dr. Roger Allen embarked on his life-long study and translation of Arabic fiction.⁹

In “*Between Words: Living Language*,” Hala Hatim quotes Allen Roger as having declared in an interview with her that “I (Allen) was shocked that a living language was being taught as a dead language”¹⁰ and “a controversial language,” as the late Edward Said was told by

⁸ See Sabry Hafez, *The Egyptian Novel in the sixties*, journal of Arabic Literature, Vol. 7 (1976), pp. 68-84.

⁹ According to his website, Roger Allen has collaborated with and translated, in addition to his translation of a number of Naguib Mahfuz' novels, “Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (*The Ship*, and *In search of Walid Masoud*, both translated in conjunction with Adnan Haydar), Yusuf Idris (the collection of stories, *In the Eye of the Beholder*, and also a volume of studies, *Critical Perspectives on Yusuf Idris*), `Abd al-rahman Munif (*Endings*), Mayy Telmissany (*Dunyazad*—short-listed in England for the prize for the best translated novel of 2000), BenSalim Himmich, *The Polymath* (2004) and *The Theocrat* (2005), Ahmad al-Tawfiq, *Abu Musa's Women Neighbors* (2006), and Hanan al-Shaykh, *The Locust and the Bird* (2009)”. See <https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~rallen/>

¹⁰ See “*Between Words: Living Language*,” Al-Ahram Weekly On-Line, 30 March 2006, Issue N. 788. pp. 76-79).

a Western publisher. In this respect, it is worth mentioning Dr Allen's take on the problems faced by a literary translator from Arabic, as he states in the same interview with Hala Halim is:

Totally practical; translation from Arabic is not a profession in which there are any degrees or standards or rewards. The best you can say is that nobody translates "Arabic" unless they are an 'amateur' in the original sense of the word, in the sense of lover. (*Al-Ahram Weekly*, p. 78)

In this regard, Roger Allen puts the blame on the Arab publishing houses whose laxity in disseminating Arabic literature and thought can be observed, for

there seems to have been little or no progress in the development of a system for the distribution of books within the Arab world or indeed in the establishment of officially sanctioned cooperative, interregional cultural projects within which discussions of translation activities might occur. (*The Happy Traitor*, p. 474)

Note that Roger Allen made this negative remark in connection with the Arab publishing houses that attended the Frankfurt Book Fair (where the Arab world was the guest of honor, and which from Roger Allen's point of view "was a massive failure at every level.")

There is yet a third scholar/translator who has devoted much of his academic career, albeit late in his life, to the study of Arabic literature, as well as to the translation of Arabic texts into English. It is Richard Jacquemond, the French scholar who masters the Arabic language, English as well as French, his native language. Jacquemond took interest in the study of Arabic language and its translation while he was studying at the Arab University of Cairo in 1983, a period that culminated in his translation of some 15 works into French by authors as diverse as Mohammed Berrada, Mohammed Zakaria, Naguib Mahfouz, Latifa Ezziaat, Fouad Zakaria. Also, Richard Jacquemond's seven year tenure at the French Embassy in Egypt was a prolific period, and was deservedly labeled 'the golden age' of translation in Egypt; many books were

translated that dealt with issues in the social sciences, intellectual history as well as other contemporary issues.

With regard to his views on the status of translation in the Arab world, whether into French or English, Jacquemond maintains in his essay titled “*Towards an Economy and Poetics of Translation from and into Arabic*, that

the search for a viable answer to the imbalance existing between Arabic and English in terms of the number of books that get translated in both languages should not be sought in such arguments as the difficulty of the Arabic language, the dearth of professional translators, but that the “crux of the matter lay elsewhere, in the history of the relations between the Arabs and French cultures. (*Cultural Encounters*: p. 117)

It is indeed a history very much dominated by western cultural hegemony, and “une illustration assez exemplaire de l’échange inégal entre une langue centrale ou dominante (le français) et une langue périphérique ou dominée (l’Arabe)”, as he succinctly puts it in his essay titled “Les flux de traduction entre le français et l’arabe depuis les années 1980” (p. 2).¹¹

Another issue that runs throughout much of what Jacquemond has produced on Arabic-French and English translation is the mistrust that he has in the statistics that are often displayed to account for the imbalance observed with respect to this traffic. In *Cultural Encounters* (p. 125), he deplores the fact that:

In the absence of statistics and even remotely systematic bibliographies, precise figures on the share of translated books in the Arab market cannot be given. At least it can be noted that the share is much smaller than it ought to be in view of the position of Arab culture in global trends in production and traffic of the written word. (p. 125)

¹¹ cf. Richard Jacquemond, « Translation and Cultural Hegemony: The Case of French-Arabic Translation », in Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *Rethinking Translation*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 139-158.

The quasi-impossibility of producing any exact figures concerning the traffic between Arabic and English, figures that are not scarce though, can be attributed to a crisis in contemporary intellectual life, and certainly to the negligence of the officially accountable institutions, as well as the book market itself. Quoting Shawqi Galal, Jacquemont argues that

la plupart des pays arabes n'ont pas retenu les leçons du passé et le champ de la traduction demeure chaotique. En termes de quantité, en dépit de l'augmentation du nombre de livres traduits dans le monde arabe de 175 par an dans la période 1970-75 à 330, ce chiffre correspond au cinquième des traductions publiées en Grèce. Le total des livres traduits de l'époque d'*Al-Ma'mûn* à aujourd'hui s'élève à 10 000 – l'équivalent de ce que l'Espagne traduit en un an (*Le flux*, p : 3)

In view of this alarming situation, which is confirmed in the 2003 Arab Human Development Report, one should wonder why translation traffic from Arabic into English has been so weak compared to other language combinations. Unfortunately, very little insight can be had in response to this question in Arab scholarship on the subject. Jacquemont's contribution towards locating an adequate answer to this question, in addition to the many translations that he has completed so far, puts him – in my opinion—as one of the most essential contributors to the social, political and cultural life of the Arab world.

Another major contributor to the field of literary translation from Arabic into English is the award-winning Humphrey Davies who, within the span of a decade only, could complete the translation of some 25 works of modern Arabic literature. One could cite here in particular 'Alaa Al-Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building*, five novels by Elias Khoury, including *Gate of the Sun*, and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq's *Leg over Leg*.

Humphrey Davies has lived throughout the Arab world since 1979, after working for a number of non-governmental organizations in several Arab countries, including the Sudan,

Tunisia and Palestine. He left the Arab region only to complete his Ph.D. degree at the University of California Berkeley in Near Eastern Studies. His awards include the inaugural Banipal Prize for Arabic literary translation in 2006 for his translation of Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* (2005), and was awarded the same Prize in 2010 for his translation of the same author's novel *Yalo* (2009). He is currently collaborating with the American University at Cairo (AUC), and is pursuing a translation career for a living.

In an interview with *The Quarterly Conversation*, an online journal, Humphrey Davis was asked about his opinion why “there’s not much Arabic literature in translation, in general.”¹² His answer went as follows:

(. . .) I wish somebody would make a list of everything that’s been translated than people are aware of. The English-language publishing world is often attacked for not being interested in Arabic literature, or for being interested in the wrong Arabic literature. There have been some outstanding pioneers, like Denys Johnson-Davies. And at the moment, there is a nice little group of highly competent translators. I think interest is growing. There is an increased number of people studying Arabic, yielding a large number interested in translating. Some of them are going to be very good translators. There is much greater interest among publishers now. There’s a real momentum. (*The Quarterly Conversation*, December 2009)

An opinion such as this one by an eminent translator of literature from Arabic into English is quite promising, but remains notwithstanding subjective in that it is not corroborated by any specific data. It, for instance, contradicts Richard Jacquemond’s (and Roger Allen’s, for that matter) views on the subject; that is, the fact that literary translation from Arabic into English has suffered –and still does—suffer from the grip of the West’s cultural hegemony; or as Alexandra Buchner and Alice Guthrie have it, Arabic fiction has been the victim of

¹² See <http://quarterlyconversation.com/the-humphrey-davies-interview>

a powerfully pervasive orientalist notion that modern Arabic literature was compromised in terms of maturity, and irrelevant to outsiders. It was seen, in the main, as only having worth as social documentary, rather than as literature *per se*.” (2011)

His view, be it noted, is markedly different from the one expressed, some eight years before, by Hosam Aboul-Ela in his “*Challenging the Embargo: Arabic Literature in the US Market*”:

The Arab translation community is a bedraggled group, receiving virtually no encouragement or support from publishers. Only three percent of all books published in English are translated from foreign languages, and within this group, translations from Arabic represent the weakest of the weak. (*Challenging*, 2001: p. 42)

In the same vein, one recalls Shawqi Galal’s oft-quoted statement that “we always translate too little and too late, never the ‘good’ books, and never as we should” (qtd. in Jacquemond, 2009, p. 7)

Equally invaluable in this respect is the contribution made by the eminent translator and scholar Marilyn Booth, who has equally been a great asset in the field of literary translation from Arabic into English. The rationale behind including a list, albeit a short one, of some eminent translators is not just in keeping with the growing interest nowadays in what has become known as Translator Studies, as already noted in the preliminary remarks, but more particularly because of my conviction that one will not come to a better understanding of how translation plays out within a specific social structure, and how its major translation-related topoi migrate between and are transferred to other nations, without putting the translator center-stage. Andrew Chesterman reminds us in his “*The Name and Nature of Translation Studies*, ”

In Translator Studies, texts are secondary, the translators themselves are primary; this priority leads to quite different kinds of research questions. (This is not to deny that product-oriented research can reveal interesting things about the people behind the texts.) (*The Name*, pp: 15-16)

It is with these thoughts on the crucial importance of translators in translation practice that we turn now to Marilyn Booth, a scholar/translator who has also contributed a great deal towards sensitizing the western readership about modern Arabic fiction. Booth's translation of Rajaa Alsanea, be it noted, "reveal[s] interesting things about the people behind the texts."

Marilyn Booth is a Professor of Contemporary Arab World Studies at the University of Oxford. In 2014-15, she was senior Humanities Research Fellow at New York University, Abu Dhabi, and prior to that held the Iraq Chair in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Her most recent book is *Classes of Ladies of Cloistered Spaces: Writing Feminist History through Biography in fin-de-siècle Egypt* (Edinburgh, 2005). More specifically, Dr. Marilyn Booth has translated upwards of a dozen novels, short-story collections and memoirs from Arabic, including work by Hoda Barakat, Somaya Ramadan, Ibtihal Salem, Nawal al-Sa'dawi, Tahar Tawfiq, and Latifa Zayyat. She also has to her credit the translation of *The Penguin's Song* by Hassan Daoud (2014).

As an active literary translator, mostly of contemporary Arabic fiction into English, she also writes on issues of translation and has been carrying out some activist-oriented research on contemporary practices of Arabic literary translation, especially first-author/second-author [translator] interactions and the politics of publishing and marketing. An oft-quoted article that deals with the question of authorship and marketability is her essay "*Translator vs Author: Girls of Riyadh Go to New York*", "which discusses translation practice in the context of the recent North American and British marketing of works by Arab and/or Muslim authors, and the strong bias toward "transparent" translation that privileges sociological content over literary quality; that is, the widespread tendency among publishers to accept only those works that tend to

‘Orientalize the Other’ through what she calls in her “*The Muslim Woman As Celebrity Author and the Politics of Translating Arabic*,” ‘Orientalist ethnographicism,’

a way of seeing and writing the Other that grounds authority in a written narrative of personal experience, “capturing” a society through the I/eye; and furthermore, claiming the authority of graphing the text in a global (and globalizing) language of reception, which is today predominantly English. (p.151)

Taking her recent translation of Rajaa Alsanea’s *Banat al-Riyadh* (Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, Penguin, 2007) as a springboard, Marilyn Booth argues that the revisions that were made by the press in open concert with the author herself to her translation is an unwelcome move that seeks to domesticate the text and mute the novel’s gender politics.¹³ Indeed, the conflict that arose between the author Rajaa Alsanea and the bitterness that Marilyn Booth has experienced as a result of the changes that the author allowed herself to include in the translated text without any prior consent also finds expression in “*The Muslim Woman*,” cited above, where she bitterly argues right from the beginning that

between the presence of my name on the title page, its absence in the Acknowledgments, and Alsanea’s invocation of me as a desultory editor of her English lies a story of text circulation and commodification that, I argue, is best understood when one considers the apparatus of publicity and public image-making along with the less visible process of actually producing the text of a translation. (p. 150)

The incident, I contend, is indicative of the fact that translators’ symbolic capital is likely to drain when confronted with factors such marketability and commodification, as well as with such gatekeepers as publishing houses for whom “the process of actually producing a text of a

¹³ “That she (i.e. Raja’ al-Sani’) has been able to dismiss my reading of the text and replace it with hers challenges a frequently-adduced theme in postcolonial translation studies: the notion that the “first-world translator” might have the power to shape the “third-world text.” “*The Muslim Woman as Celebrity Author and the Politics of Translating Arabic: Girls of Riyadh go on the road*”. Marilyn Booth: *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Special Issue: *Marketing Muslim women* (Fall 2010), pp. 149-182.

translation” is an act that can be dismissed, just as Marilyn Booth’s name was dropped from *Go Girls of Riyadh*.

Another viewpoint that Marilyn Booth oftentimes repeats in her interviews is that the selection of fictional works to be translated from Arabic into English is oftentimes motivated by political and ideological factors, rather than by any aesthetic value of the work itself. What are often considered to be *best-sellers* are nothing short of works that, as Marilyn puts it,

eschew the myriad experimental and thematically and stylistically complex writing practices of many novelists in the Arab world today in favor of a plot-driven, chronologically straightforward realism that is the hallmark of popular fiction. (p.156)

Worse still, the selection rarely takes into account the importance of the subject matter that a work of fiction has for a community, a region or the whole of humanity. In an interview with Claire Jacobson, Marilyn Booth wraps up the interview with a bitter note on the status of Arabic-English translation in the publishing industry:

Given all that is going on in the Arab region, all the tragedy people are facing, the long tragedy the Palestinian people have endured, and the persistence of Orientalist stereotypes about “Arabs” and “Muslims”—and given the fact that publishers aren’t necessarily keen to publish what we think is most important to translate—the works we choose to translate, the ways we translate them, the editing, and the choice of cover art all have political stakes.¹⁴

Likewise, in several other interviews, Marilyn does welcome the recent attention that has been given to Arabic fiction and Arabic literature in general. She; however, deplores the fact that publishers are increasingly “narrowing down the channels of what gets translated . . . It is a minefield dealing with authors, publishers and editors, and agents,” as she says in the same interview.

¹⁴ Retrieved in //www.asymptotejournal.com/interview/an-interview-with-marilyn-booth/

It is noteworthy that the five prominent translators that we have introduced here are, I believe, representative of the individual efforts that have been deployed towards exposing the western reader to Arabic fiction. Their professional experience, their translations, their worries, and more particularly their confrontation with the tumultuous world of the publishing industry all give insight into the heavy burden of trying to introduce some serious literary works to the western world, all despite the scarcity of any State support. Their contribution is undoubtedly praiseworthy. However, working under these conditions, one is bound to toe the line of market-driven urges by gradually dispensing with serious works in favor of less serious, more marketable works of fiction. The corollary to this would be a piling up of more negative stereotypical images of the Arab world, which would certainly be a fruitful area of study.

As Mohamed-Salah Omri puts it in his *“Notes on the Traffic Between Theory and Arabic Literature,*

In most Western universities, Arabic literature is rarely studied by itself or for itself. It is subject to disciplinary traffic and intersections, on the one hand, and to what might be called a political predicament, on the other. (p. 731)

Indeed, the ‘disciplinary traffic’ that Arabic literature is subject to, as well as its ‘political predicament,’ are certainly manifestations of a globalized juggernaut machine that only moves where the money goes.

In reaction to the above listing of what I consider to be some of the most well-known, as well as the most productive western translators, one would legitimately wonder why no translators have been included on the list that come from the Arab world. The answer is simple; there are very few Arab translators who have had any comparable influence on the reading tastes of the western readership as the translators here above- cited have. It suffices to examine, even in

passing the well-reputed Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation, which finds expression in *Banipal Magazine* ¹⁵.

A close examination of the *Banipal Magazine* website, one would certainly notice that ever since 2006, the year the first prize was awarded, only seven translators of Arab origin were given the prize; most of the other translators are British or American. Also, no Arab translator won the prize after 2011, the year when the Arab-American university professor, writer and poet, Khaled Muttawa was selected for the prize for his translation of *Adonis: Selected Poems*, which was later published by Yale University Press. Pr. Khaled Muttawa, be it noted, has been shortlisted again in 2018 for the Saif Ghobash Prize for his translation of *Concerto al-Quds* by Adonis. The testimony made by Pete Clark for the Banipal Trust for Arab Literature that “since the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to the late Naguib Mahfouz in 1988, the English-language reading world has been made aware that there is a rich store of contemporary writing in Arabic; good translators have been few and those few need encouragement.” ¹⁶

That this “rich store of contemporary writing in Arabic” be left in the hands of a bunch of western translators whose frame of reference is closely tied to a particular ideology, a particular system of (translation) ethics, as well as a particular world-view (*weltanschauung*) will certainly have serious repercussions on culture and society in the Arab world, as well as on the “Anglo-Arab encounter.” More specifically, for translation of Arabic fiction be predominantly carried out by western translators is a form of violence ¹⁷-- in Laurent Venuti’s sense of the word--

¹⁵ One should particularly note the opinion of the late Edward Said, made back in 2000, that the magazine is “very important. I read it regularly.” See https://www.banipal.co.uk/about_us/

¹⁶ Retrieve in <https://www.banipal.co.uk/contributors/594/peter-clark/>

¹⁷ In addressing the issue of the viability of translation in reaction to the cultural and social conditions under which it is produced, Laurence Venuti argues in his *The Translator’s Invisibility* that “violence resides in the very purpose and activity of translation: the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs and representations that

against Arabic literature, and culture as a whole, for in wishing to accommodate the literary taste of the western reader, and meet their ‘horizon of expectation,’ the western translator, if not constrained by any regulatory policy, will most probably gloss over the cultural content of a literary work, and rewrite, maybe distort, that content.¹⁸ Even their selection of what gets translated is not an innocent move.

Thus will the translator in question be accommodating, to use L.Venuti’s terms, the literary work so that it ties in with a specific model of writing, in this case a basically western one. S/he often does so by playing around, as it were, with the work through editing, adding, and even deleting what contradicts the recipients’ cultural norms; that is, what is acceptable and what is not within the readership system of reference. This practice is categorically unethical, as it does more harm than good to the source-text. It is also manipulative, and does a disservice to the target culture in its very selection of literary works that flatter the West by including stereotypical clichés about the Muslim woman, the veil, gender-based injustices, and other such topics that tend to constitute a rigid universe of discourse about Arab culture.

As a social agent, the translator thus fosters a universe of discourse that tends to over-emphasize a negative picture of Arab culture and helps, by the same gesture, anchor western cultural domination. In other words, by foregrounding negative images of Arab culture, a

preexist in the target language, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality, always determining the production, circulation, and reception of texts.” (p.18)

¹⁸ Lest we fall in the inappropriate trap of some sweeping generalization, let me single out Denys-Johnson Davis for having had a peculiar sense of the harms that a translation can do to a culture. In his case, it was Arab culture, which he wholly embraced later in his life. In his superb autobiography *Memories in Translation*, he maintains that : « I [...] hold the view that it is not up to a translator to ‘improve’ any piece of writing, by either adding to it or deleting from it, though – Heaven knows! – one is often tempted to do so » (Johnson-Davies, 2006, p. 100). See, in this connection, Mustapha Ettobi, *Denys Johnson-Davies : figure de la traduction de la littérature arabe* (Erudit, 25 Octobre 2007), retrieved in <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/016660ar>

western translator, not matter how well-meaning they may be, will help in establishing and imposing western forms of culture and urge, by the same gesture, Arab writers to write with a western audience in mind. This is what I would call a cultural mummification, a form of embargo that keeps Arabic culture in limbo, and even at the risk of belaboring the point, let me emphasize the fact that it is the translator's responsibility first and foremost.¹⁹ Of course, this is not meant to sanctify the powers to be (as embodied in academic and cultural institutions of all sorts), for they too are to blame for not sanctioning translators' monopoly of a great asset which is, as Jacquemond (p. 3) puts it, "closely connected to scientific research and creativity," one that "fulfil[s] the needs of scientific research," not to serve as a decorative "library to enrich the palaces of caliphs and princes".

3. **An afterthought:** If the gist of this paper were to be expressed in a short statement, I would say: unless the powers to be in the Arab world are sensitized into the role that translation, and more specifically, translators as social agents can play in maintaining an even intercultural dialogue, and unless these powers to be are made aware of the need to reclaim a cultural space and voice to counter the negativity spread through translation, the West will continue to impose its cultural hegemony, and individual translators, should they continue to operate outside any institutional structure, will continue to rule the roost.

¹⁹ In *Translation, Power, Subversion*, Alvarez and Carmen-Africa Vidal, (eds., 1996) maintain that a translators can be anything but innocent, for they always come with: "their own ideology; by their feeling of superiority or inferiority towards the language in which they are writing the text being translated; by the prevailing poetical rules at that time; by the very language in which the texts they are translating is written; by what the dominant institutions and ideology expect of them; by the public for whom the translation is intended." (p.4)

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