

The Mummification of Arabic Language and Literature; or the threat of epistemicide.

By Sanaa Abouzaid

ملخص:

تروم هذه المقالة إلى جذب الباحث وحته على استكشاف وضعية الحصار والتحنيط الفكري الذي أصبحت تعانيه اللغة العربية وآدابها في عالمنا المعاصر.

وقد تناولت بالفحص بعض مظاهر هذه الوضعية الحالية، على ضوء مفهوم وأد الأفكار، كما تم طرح الهيمنة الثقافية للغرب، وسيطرة اللغة الانجليزية في هذه الفترة مما هدد مستقبل اللغة الضاد وتدنى مكانتها عما كانت فيه في الماضي. وفي نفس السياق، تعرض المقالة أنموذجاً لما يسمى بالتحنيط الفكري، من خلال أحد الكتاب العرب المرموقين (عبد الرحمن منيف). ومن أجل تخطي هذه الوضعية، تركز المقالة على أهمية دور الأنتلجنسيا العربية (المفكر العربي) في ترسيخ الثقافة العربية وإعادة إحياءها بدل اعتماد الفكر الكولونيالي، وتشجيع المبادرة الفردية في هذا الإطار.

Abstract

The present paper seeks to explore the condition of embargo and cultural mummification that Arabic language and literature have been subject to. It examines several manifestations of this condition in light of the notion of epistemicide, and argues that owing to the cultural hegemony (not to say tyranny) of the West, as well as the predominance of the English language, Arabic language seems to be threatened with linguicide. Similarly, the paper argues through the specific example of an Arab author how the whole of Arabic literary legacy is mummified. The paper suggests that one way out of this situation is for the Arab intelligentsia to decolonize its mind, and support individual effort towards de-centering the Western canon of thought.

Keywords: Arabic language and literature; translation; cultural mummification; linguicide; epistemicide.

Recently, on 21 September 2019 to be exact, the electronic version of *The Guardian* ¹ released a list of *The Best 100 Books of the 21st Century*. The list includes books from every which corner of the world: European, American, Asian, Latin American, and Australian. Some are originally in English, others in English translation. Not a single Arab-authored book is mentioned. A deliberate negligence, no doubt, one that speaks volumes about the situation of embargo that Arabic culture and language have been subject to for many years now, especially following the military retreat of the European colonial powers from the territories whose people they had subjugated, and whose wealth they had plundered, leaving both the people and their land in a situation of in-dependence; or dependency to be precise. As a matter of fact, the situation of dependency that the colonized peoples [Arabs in our case] were thrown into has been reinforced by their displacement from the Western structures of industry and technology, which left them trailing behind, a community of ‘captive minds’ who will hardly be able to catch up with the West. The example adduced here is nothing short of a Eurocentric; nay, a white supremacist attitude that seeks to perpetuate the Western cultural domination of the East, its soft power and hegemony over the latter. The fact of the matter is that the main trope of such a Eurocentric attitude is the colonization of knowledge, not simply the colonization of territory and land. And part and parcel of this type of colonization is to sweep under the rug the Arabs’ literary tradition, their creative potential and; more specifically, their humanity.

That no Arab writer should be included on the list of the *Best 100 Books of the 21st Century* does no justice to Arab thought and culture; it robs the latter of its undeniable contribution to the knowledge economy and effaces, by the same gesture, a long and deep-seated history of literary and scientific creation. Indeed, the exclusion of any Arab author from the list in question is very much reminiscent of, and indeed finds substance in, the old-age claim made by Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay back in 1835 in his propaganda-oriented “*Minute on Education*,” where he vehemently supports the teaching of English in India and, by the same token, urges that Arabic and Sanskrit be dismissed from schools and colleges, supposedly because they contribute little to nothing in the knowledge economy of the world as Macaulay witnessed it. Says Macaulay to Lord William Bentinck in paragraph 10 of “*Minute on Education*”:

I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education. (1835: parag. 10)

A discriminatory statement such as this is obviously driven by the colonial impulse to degrade the intellectual legacy of both Indians and Arabs as one step in the systematic move towards

¹ Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/21/best-books-of-the-21st-century>

effacing their language and identity, which will ultimately result in linguicide.² Macaulay's statement also slams the door on the potential probability that Indian and Arab cultures could be taken up for translation since, as he claims, "the whole native literature of India and Arabia" is worthless. In contrast, Western literature, he claims, is intrinsically superior, and deserves to be integrated in any sound plan of education.

As such, the privilege granted to Western culture can be read within the context of the academic imperialism that has been in operation ever since the retreat of the colonial powers from colonized territories. Academic imperialism; or what Syed Hussein Alatas and Vineeta Sinha (2017) call "academic dependency," describes the situation when the colonized party, of a 'captive mind' as it is, blindly follows the dictates of the Western educational model. This will ultimately destabilize its own system of education only to become susceptible of embracing the Eurocentric episteme. Thus will education in the post-colonial setting, as Esmaeil Zeiny (2019) puts it, be "repackaged and then reestablished to institutionalize the superiority of the West, [and] justify their colonial presence" (p. 91). The viability of the condition of superiority that the West seeks to preserve, it must be added, largely depends on the negligence; or rather mummification, of the Arabs' cultural and literary legacy, and indeed "all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day," as Bill Ashcroft, *et al* (1989, p. 2) maintain.

With these preliminary remarks on the colonial encounter between the East and the West, and how the latter has been subject for upwards of two centuries now to a specifically Western epistemology and a system of reference that have kept it within the prison-house of mental captivity, I turn now to lay out some specific instances to illustrate my point that Arabic language and literature have not only been embargoed,³ but mummified and are set up in line for some form of epistemicide,⁴ all within the systematic dictates of cultural and its concomitant academic imperialism.

A striking example of how marginalized Arabic literature has been can be traced through the examination of the place it is given in encyclopedias and anthologies of world literature, which I consider to be a misnomer in that it veers away from its initially humanistic principles, as ensconced in his idea of *Weltliteratur* ("world literature"), which sought to bring nations together

² According to *The encyclopedia of language and linguistics*, "'Linguicide' is the extermination of languages, an analogous concept to (physical) genocide, whereas language death is the withering away of languages, by analogy with natural death . . . linguicide, by contrast, implies that there is an agent involved in causing the death of languages. The agent can be active ('attempting to kill a language') or passive ('letting a language die', or 'unsupported coexistence', also often leading to the death of minority languages). In liberal ideology, only an active agent with the intention to kill languages would cause linguicide, whereas the other two would fall within the domain of language death.' In Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove & Phillipson, Robert (1994). *The encyclopedia of language and linguistics*. Pergamon Press & Aberdeen University Press, 2211-2212.

³Reference is made here to the Edward W. Said's essay Embargoed Literature (1990). In *The politics of dispossession: The struggle for Palestinian self-determination, 1969-1994*. New York: Random House, 372-378.

⁴ In his *Epistemologies of the south: Justice against epistemicide* (2016), Boaventura de Sousa Santos describes epistemicide as "the murder of knowledge. Unequal exchanges among cultures have always implied the death of the knowledge of the subordinated culture, hence the death of the social groups that possessed it" (p. 92).

‘in universal peace,’ and around ‘a more humane spirit.’⁵ For instance, with the exclusive inclusion of a couple of African writers; namely, Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, ‘The sacrificial egg’ and ‘The testimony of Kihaahu Waggaheeka,’ respectively, Robert Ross’s *Colonial and postcolonial fiction: An anthology* (1999) includes, as the editor maintains, writers and literatures that “have recorded their encounters with colonialism from its beginnings to its collapse and aftermath,” (p. 1) and who come from places as varied as Africa, Canada, Australia, Pakistan, New Zealand, and the Caribbean — except for those from the Arab world. Indeed, akin to the *The best 100 books of the 21st century* mentioned above, no single Arab author is listed amidst the many writers included in the anthology. Similarly even a cursory look through the content pages of *The Arnold anthology of post-colonial literatures in English*, another voluminous anthology edited by John Thieme, and published in 1996 by Bloomsbury, includes no more than a single Arab author amongst the more than two hundred postcolonial writers anthologized-- The Sudanese Jamal Mahjoub’s novel *Navigation of a rainmaker* (1989), which is allotted the space of one page only (p. 342). An ethnocentric move such as this one goes in sharp contradiction with Theme’s claim in his introductory notes that the term postcolonial encompasses “all the cultures of the post-colonization period” (p. 2). Certainly, one could lay hand on many anthologies that take a biased, not to say blunt, stance regarding its selection of authors and their writing. One such anthology is *Women’s world: The McGraw-Hill anthology of women’s writing* (2008), whose editors claim in the preface that theirs is an anthology that “encompasses literature from seven centuries of writing in English. The works included are by women of different social backgrounds from all countries in the English speaking world” (iii). Of all the women represented in this 2015-page collection, which exceed a hundred, only one Arab author is represented: Ahdaf Souief (1950-), an Egyptian writer who writes in English, and AMA ATA AIDOO (1942-), a Ghanaian author, poet and playwright. One may wonder why no mention of other Arab women writers, who are as prolific and as sophisticated as Ahdaf Souief, are not listed-- Leila Aboulela; Fadia Faqir; Samia Serageldin. . . The list is long.

It seems that even the notion of post-colonialism itself is subject to ethnocentric bias in that it does not, it so appears at least from the two cases mentioned above, duly include all the cultures of the post-colonization period. A flagrant example is the well-referenced *The empire writes back* (1994)⁶ where Ashcroft and his coauthors claim that “we use the term ‘postcolonial’ to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day,” (p. 2)⁷ a claim that normally should not sideline any type of culture that has

⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s concept of *Weltliteratur* is considered as one of the most salient contributions by this German writer and statesman to human thought. It occupies a central place in his writings. Says Goethe in this connection: “In every field, whether the historical, the mythological, the fabulous, or the consciously imagined, one can see, behind what is national and personal, this universal quality becoming more and more apparent.. . although it can hardly be hoped that universal peace will be achieved by this means, we may trust that conflict will decrease, war become less cruel and victory less arrogant.” Retrieved from: <http://mason.gmu.edu/~ayadav/>

⁶ I am indebted for this example to Mohammed Abdullah Hussein Muharram’s essay *The marginalization of Arabic fiction in the postcolonial and world English Curriculum: Slips? Or orientalism and racism?* (2012, p. 131).

⁷ In more concrete terms, what Ashcroft and his co-authors mean by postcolonial literatures are “the literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka are all postcolonial literatures. The literature of the USA should also be placed in this category (p. 2).

witnessed the onslaught of colonization, Arabic culture being one. In this supposedly subversive book, which “is concerned with the world as it exists during and after the period of European imperial domination and the effects of this on contemporary *literatures*,” (p. 2/ emphasis added) the place of Arabic literature is inexistent, which implies in this context that Arabs have not been able to produce any literature potent enough to write back to the West.

As such, *The empire writes back* paradoxically perpetuates *cultural denigration* -- the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model (p. 9)--, a feature of the postcolonial impulse that the authors claim to debunk in their book. The implication behind Ashcroft and his co-authors pushing Arabic literary output to the periphery, voluntarily or not, is that in order to be canonized, as it were, a literary work has to be granted the seal of approval from, and acceptance by, the Western critical community. Otherwise, it will be kept in quarantine, desperately seeking literary legitimacy through translation into a foreign language. The fact of the matter is that the international literary scene nowadays, as Pascale Casanova argues in her *The world republic of letters* (2004) has turned, owing to economic globalization and the logic of supply and demand, into a globally competitive arena where authors have to struggle for recognition and legitimacy:

The single idea that dominates the literary world still today, of literature as something pure and harmonious, works to eliminate all traces of the invisible violence that reigns over it and denies the power relations that are specific to this world and the battles that are fought in it. (pp. 42-43)

The battle that Arab authors have been fighting, especially during the post-colonial period, as Pascale Casanova seems to suggest, is one already lost in so far as their mother tongue has a rather debilitating effect, and entraps them into a gridlock that “forces them to choose between translation into a literary language that cuts them off from their compatriots, but that gives them literary existence, and retreat into a small language that condemns them to invisibility or else to a purely national literary existence,” as Casanova puts it (p. 257). In any case, Arab authors are, by the force of circumstance, compelled to embrace a foreign language if they wish to be heard. For Casanova, the adoption of the French language (i.e. the imperial language) is the surest path towards winning recognition in the world republic of letters. This situation is vividly captured in Albert Memmi’s contention that:

The mother tongue of the colonized [writer] ... has no dignity in [his own] country or in the concert of peoples. If he wishes to practice a trade, make a place for himself, exist in public life and in the world, he must first submit to the language of others, that of the colonizers, his masters. In the linguistic conflict that goes on inside the colonized [writer], his mother tongue ends up being humiliated, crushed. And since this contempt has an objective basis, he ends up sharing it himself. (Qtd. in Casanova, pp. 258-259)

The language of others that a writer ought to submit to, as one can infer from the above quote, is French. This is precisely why Casanova in her listing of the many writers that are enmeshed in what she refers to as the antagonistic world of literary power and politics, makes but one single mention to an Arab author; namely, Naguib Mahfouz, who is mentioned in passing in connection with the Nobel Prize he won in 1988 (p. 151). The other Arab writers mentioned are all of Algerian descent: Kateb Yacine (pp. 230-231, 260, 272, e.g.); Albert Memmi (pp. 258-259);

Mouloud Mammeri (pp. 226, 264); Rachid Boudjedra (pp. 125, 258, 267-268, e.g.), except for Abdellâtif Laâbi (p. 257), who is from Morocco. These represent a very tiny minority compared to the many writers cited by Casanova as being key players on the international literary scene, apparently in which the Arab world does not exist. The often bandied about notion of the "globalization of literary studies" is thus betrayed by the careful exclusion of non-Western texts in critical and pedagogical contexts, and only reveals systematic configurations of power and domination.

That Pascale Casanova should include a list of the well-known Algerian writers, excluding by the same token hundreds of brilliant Arab writers from various corners of the world is certainly consonant with her theoretical assumption that no international success can be had for an Arab writer if it does not bear the imprint of Paris, 'the bourse of literary value,' as she calls it (p. 13). Hers, in other words, is a Eurocentric assumption that implies that the success of an Arab writer depends largely on their adoption of the European, and more specifically the French, literary tradition, which brings one, as Wail S. Hassan (2000) says in another context, to "the cultural imperialism of Macaulay's grimly pragmatic program (advocated a few years later in the infamous "Indian Education: Minute of the 2nd of February, 1835) for the re-education of Indian youth in English literature on the grounds of its "intrinsic superiority" to the literatures of the "Orient" (p.39).

In more concrete terms, the supposed 'intrinsic superiority' of the European languages and literatures finds expression in the actual treatment of Arabic language and literature, I submit, a significant piece in the jig-saw of power and domination. What follows then will be an attempt to illustrate the workings of power and domination as they operate in the context of the translation of Arabic literature into English, where translation serves not the purpose of establishing "more neighbourly relations, and a desire for a freer system of intellectual give-and-take," as was envisioned by Goethe,⁸ but one where the colonizing culture keeps the colonized one in embargo, mummifies it and, as pointed earlier, sets it in line for some form of epistemicide. For illustrative purposes, I will examine some of the *topoi* (commonplace ideas) commonly held about Arab language and literature, with a view to piecing together some of the ingredients that have contributed to repackaging (and embargoing) them.

Broadly speaking, writing in the Arab world is a bitter experience, fraught as it is with obstacles, stereotypes and prejudice. It is an isolating experience, where to be a writer is to have to carry the asphyxiating burden of having to write in a context of coercion and censorship. However, the heaviest burden, according to Pete Clark (2000), is a linguistic one. This kind of burden has to do with what is often considered to be the intrinsic value of the Arabic language itself; namely, that Arabic is a language that does not lend itself to proper translation, whether into English or into any other language, "a controversial language," as was the response of one publisher to the late Edward Said's request that he publish some Arabic novels into English.⁹ Indeed, Arabic is often considered to be linguistically opaque, hard to learn and is in dire need for scholars who specialize in editing and proofreading. As Clark maintains:

⁸ Retrieved from <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/67/p803/>

⁹ See Edward Said's "Embargoed literature" cited above.

When a book does get published, the overall quality of production is often poor. Editing and proofreading are underdeveloped skills. A First-time writer may have to pay or bankroll a publisher to ensure the publication of his or her book. (p. 63)

A perception such as this certainly coincides with the kind of representation that many language learners make of Arabic. A simple Google search of the question “is Arabic a difficult language?” yields dozens of answers as to what makes Arabic as such, despite the many assurances made by Arabic scholars and other non-native speakers of Arabic that it is not as hard as many people think. The following statements, which I have collected from the Language Center at Warwick University Website are in order: ¹⁰

- The script is impossibly difficult, like hieroglyphics;
- Arabic has too many exotic sounds, impossible to learn for foreigners;
- Arabic has an enormous vocabulary: 400 words for a camel, 200 for a lion, etc;
- Arabic grammar is impossibly complicated.

Taken together, these statements can be considered as being part of a discursive formation ¹¹ that is very much part of a general discourse on anything of Arabic origin, language and literature alike. That Arabic, or any other language for that matter, should be difficult to learn is a relative situation, but when affirmative statements such as these are disseminated about it, their effect will be that they will be taken as matters of fact, a reality and a way of thinking. The discursive formation that is maintained about Arabic could be said therefore to be motivated by “ideological reasons that have nothing to do with the way the language is lived, used and experienced by native speakers,” as Edward Said puts it in his article “*Eloquent, elegant Arabic*,” published in *Le Monde* in August, 2004.

Indeed, from a critical discourse analysis perspective, the above statements on the difficulty of Arabic should be seen as being part and parcel of a deep-seated Western discourse on the inferiority of Arabs. No wonder that Arabic literature should receive but very little attention in academic circles in the West. As a language of instruction, Arabic has always been relegated to a peripheral position, although it is the 5th common language in the world, spoken as it is by upwards of around 300 million people around the globe. And it seems that the situation has stagnated as regards the teaching/learning of Arabic, for in her updated report on *Literary translation from Arabic into English in the United Kingdom: 1999-2017*, Alice Guthrie (2017) writes the following:

It is worth noting in this context that language acquisition expectations for UK and US undergraduate Arabic language courses are set very low compared to other modern languages such as French or Spanish. In practice, one can graduate with a first class degree in Arabic from a reputable UK university without having read an

¹⁰ Retrieved from <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/languagecentre/academic/arabic/arabicnothard/>

¹¹ According to *oxfordreference.com*, a discursive formation, a concept first used by Michel Foucault, refers to ‘the general enunciative principle that governs a group of verbal performances’. The concept is also used to refer to the type of discourse generated by the ensemble of verbal performances that are made in connection with one specific pattern or set of concerns, perspectives, concepts, or themes.

entire novel in Arabic or written a composition of more than 500 words in Arabic.
(p. 13)

Similarly, the political and cultural environment within which the Arabic language has evolved within academic circles “has never been more than un- promising,” as Roger Allen puts it in his 2004 article on “*Perspectives on Arabic teaching and learning*.”

From the era of the Crusades beginning at the cusp of the 12th century, via the distorted history of the re-conquest of Spain, to central European encounters with the proverbial "Turk," Christian Europe has confronted the Middle Eastern Other with a distorting blend of antipathy and fascination, the latter reaction seen at its most vivid in the reception of the *Arabian nights*. (p. 275)

Indeed, the blend of antipathy for and fascination with the Arabic language is rooted in a deeply-anchored prejudice against Arabs, and a predominantly Eurocentric attitude that tends to push Arabic on the margin of the Western frame of reference on the grounds that “Learning Arabic is a Brain Workout,” which is the title of a paper by an unknown blogger who claims that “researchers from the University of Haifa in Israel have determined that when it comes to learning Arabic, the brain needs to be able to focus and process the various little details that are evident in the written language,” and who adds a note that can only be described as a form of pseudoscience where s/he claims that “one reason why scientists believe the Arabic language proves to be difficult to learn” is that “other languages such as English or even Hebrew where both hemispheres of the brain are involved in order to decipher it, when it comes to Arabic, it is just the right side hemisphere at work.”¹² Are not these claims, one is led to wonder with Said Faiq, only “projections of the West’s own fears and desires masqueraded as objective knowledge”?¹³ My contention is that they are.

More importantly, a negative description of Arabic such as this one does not of course spare Arab people and their culture in general, as can be read in the following example that Reuven Snir cites in *Modern Arabic literature and the West: Self-image, interference, and reception*: “Nearly all national movements begin with a renaissance of the national language, legends, and literature, but Modern Egypt has no language, no literature, no legends of its own” (p. 60). This extremely degrading view of the Arabic language is evidently corroborative of the description that “Arabic is a controversial language,” as already mentioned. Indeed, these two statements belong to the same universe of discourse, and reinforce the linguistic imperialism that seeks to valorize English at the expense of other languages, which are often associated with such epithets as ‘minority,’ ‘periphery,’ as well as ‘untranslatability.’ It is a view that explicitly echoes one of the early tenets of British imperialism which can be traced, among other, in the writings of J.R. Firth for whom “the spread of European civilization and the culture of the white race has made English a world language” and “English is the only practicable world language,” that can be

¹² Retrieved from <https://www.daytranslations.com/blog/2015/02/learning-the-arabic-language-is-a-brain-workout-5929/> Note that I consider the above statements to be a form of pseudoscience precisely because they are unverifiable, not say deceptive, claims that falsely call into question the worthiness of learning Arabic.

¹³ See Said Faiq, “*Cultural dislocation through translation*.” (2005) *Intercultural Communication Studies* XIV: 4, p. 95

"taught in a normalized form the world over." ¹⁴ Taken together, these ideas build the blocks that construct the Other, the non-Western, and in our case the Arab world, as an entity that will never be able to represent itself as long as it is 'handicapped' by the nature of the language that it uses as a vehicle of communication. It must therefore, as Karl Marx says in another context, "be represented," ¹⁵ which echoes Macaulay's ethnocentric declaration that "the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable," for there is, he contends "no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England." ¹⁶

At stake in the colonialist and imperialist politics behind J.R. Firth's ideas is the fact that the Arabic language, and cultural identity/memory are depreciated for what they are. ¹⁷ Arabic, as has already been mentioned, is used by upwards of 300 million speakers worldwide. It is also one of the 6 official languages of the United Nations, which declared December 18th as Arabic National Day (when the language was officially approved in 2010). One could also argue that the representation of the Arabic language in such a demeaning manner robs it of the legitimacy, as well as the capacity, to speak for itself, let alone produce its own knowledge. It needs therefore to be 'domesticated,' in translation parlance, a paternalistic attitude which stipulates that it be subservient to the West in every aspect of life. In the long run, this paternalistic attitude will compromise Arab identity itself; nay, will threaten it with epistemicide. ¹⁸

The question of Arab identity in connection with translation requires a measure of further reflection here, especially because "the transfer of literary texts from one culture to another is a highly politicized activity, which touches not only on historical, political and cultural relations but also on sensitive issues of cultural identification and self-representation," as Van Leeuwen argues in his "*The cultural context of translating Arabic literature*" in *Cultural Encounters* (2004, p.24). It is a question that is closely tied with the colonialist project to 'Orientalize the Other' so much so that it becomes an 'enemy' to Western civilization, an entity that is positioned in direct contrast to the Occident which represents itself as modern, civilized, and rational, but which pictures the Orient as mysterious, traditional, backward and, above all, in need of the

¹⁴ Cited in Robert de Beaugrande (2005). Geopolitics, geolinguistics and translatability. *Intercultural Communication Studies* XIV: 4. 2005, p. 9.

¹⁵ The reference here is to the statement by Karl Marx, used as an epigraph in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which reads: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (1978: 2).

¹⁶ In *Minute by the Hon'ble T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835*.

Retrieved from: <http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/history/primarydocs/education/Macaulay001.htm>

¹⁷ In *Is Arabic untranslatable?* (2016), Robyn Creswell laments the fact that "in the media and the popular sphere it is reduced to the lexicon of sectarianism (Sunni, Shia, Alawi), religiously inspired violence (jihad, shahid [martyr]), and female subjugation (niqab, hijab). Complex traditions like the sharia are cartoonishly misrepresented, and the region is generally made to serve, as it often has, as the mirror image of our idealized self." In *Popular Culture* 28:3, p. 447.

¹⁸ The question of the loss of identity; or at least its subservience to the cultural hegemony of the West is too general a question and, be it admitted, beyond the scope of this paper. It suffices to remind the reader, as does Yasir Suleiman in his illuminating *Arabic in the fray: Language, ideology and cultural politics* (2013) that "the association of Arabic with group identity is inscribed in the lexical link between the name of the people, 'arab, and that of the language, 'arabiyya, in a way which may not be mirrored with similar transparency or connectedness in other language situations" (p.51).

'mission civilisatrice'¹⁹ of the West. In view of this situation, for the Arab; or Arab Muslim for that matter, to carve out an identity means to have to confront the prevailing Western discourse of Orientalism – some of whose constituents have been explained above—which is mediated through literature, translation and the media, print and broadcast, in general. The confrontation with this discourse creates a colonial experience where the Arab/Other is made to question its own identity, and to “redefine the way in which [they] understand themselves in the larger contours of their world,” as Micah A. Hughes (2011) puts it in his “*Representations of identity in three modern Arabic novels*,” where he shows in his study of Tayeb Salih’s *Season of migration to the north* how colonial power dismantled and transformed modes of identification as such, leaving deeper chasms in how people experienced life and community” (p. 12). One important manifestation of such a dismantling of identity can be traced in the cultural translation of the Arab world, where the myth of Eastern inferiority finds expression in a literary discourse about the East; that is, in a translated Arab world that is at times portrayed as inferior and barbaric and at others as correctly following the dictates of the Western world, being ‘the same but not quite’ (to use Homi Bhabha’s oft-quoted expression) as Westerners.²⁰ Equally important in this respect is the fact that the imperialist identity politics upon which Western ideology rests, implicitly suggests that for Arabic, a peripheral language in the eyes of the West, to be a translatable language, it ought, in addition to the lexical borrowing of various types of terminology, to conform to the syntactic as well as stylistic rules of English through loan translations (or ‘calque,’ as it is commonly known); that is, an expression (word or phrase) nearly literally adopted by one language from another through translation. It is only in this way that Arabic would, it seems, find a room in this increasingly globalized world, if it models itself onto the language of the center; that is, English.

One particular manifestation of this need, as it were, for following English in terms of syntax and structure through loan translations, more particularly, has been pointed out by Yousef Bader who examined a substantial number of Arabic expressions that are used in Jordanian newspapers, with a view to listing any type of expression which happens to be a loan translation from English. In his article, “*Loan translations in written Jordanian news media*,” (1994) he lists hundreds of loan translations that are closely similar to English in terms of word-order, such as the use of the present tense, the use of compound adjectives as well as other forms of syntactic structure.²¹

¹⁹ La mission civilisatrice,’ be it noted, has generally been associated with the French colonial project, especially with regard to the French cultural policy in the Middle East during the period obtaining between 1960 and 1914, a period during which the so-called French nationalism took it upon itself the necessity to perform the moral duty of the civilized authority towards the backward people (“remplir les devoirs du civilisé envers des populations plus arriérées). See Henri Brunschwig, *Mythes et réalités de l’impérialisme colonial français, 1871-1914*. Paris, 1960 : 174.

²⁰ Note that we consider the famous line in Rudyard Kipling’s poem “*The ballad of east and west*” (Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet”) neatly sums up the Western perception of the East, and amply explains the hegemonic power of the West has over Arab identity, culture and language.

²¹ See Yousef Bader (1994). *Loan translations in written Jordanian news media*. In *Language, discourse and translation in the West and the Middle East*, R.de. Beaugrande, A. Shunnaq, and M.H. Heliel (Eds.), Amsterdam: John Benjamins (p. 95)

In view of this situation, Arabic seems to be gradually losing the foundations of its rhetorical grandeur, its immensely rich vocabulary, one which marks every special nuance of an utterance, and has multiple words of reference, everyone who speaks the language would agree, for nearly anything.²² Because of the dominance of English on the global scene of languages, especially in the area of social networks and the wide use of the language of the Internet, all these features are now being threatened into extinction. In fact, there already exists “a yawning gap,” as Basil Hatim, succinctly puts it, “between the rich rhetorical tradition of the Arabs and the way the language is currently being used” (Qtd. in de Beaugrande, 2005, p. 14). More specifically, this “yawning gap” seems to have some serious repercussions not only on the translatability of Arabic literature, but on Arabic culture and identity in general. It is further reinforced through the way culture and identity are represented at the level of the translation strategies and decisions that a translator chooses to adopt, as well as the stance that a publisher takes regarding one author or another, considering more specifically the marketability factor, as well as the ideology that a translator supports. In connection with this particular point, Lawrence Venuti maintains in chapter 4 of “*The formation of identities*” in *The scandals of translation* (1999) that literary translation creates images of cultures from the translated texts, and the process constructs identities for these cultures, ones that are familiar enough for the Western reader whose system of reference is based on the deep-seated Eurocentric conviction that “Euro-American literature is . . . the ‘true’ literature, and whatever Islamic literature has to offer is measured against that yardstick,” as André Lefevere (1992) has it (p.75)²³. From the standpoint of Arab culture, the idea that ‘true’ literature is ‘European literature’ can be described as a form of cultural repression which “seems to support fears about the Europeanization of Arabic literature,” as Richard Van Leeuwen (op. cit. p. 25) puts it in another context.²⁴

Indeed, the deep-seated Eurocentric conviction that “Euro-American literature is . . . the ‘true’ literature” against which Islamic literature ought to be measured makes it no wonder that a great number of textbooks should present Arabs and the Muslim world through the prism of Western norms and values. Quoting Al-Halwaji *et al* (2000), Van Leeuwen maintains that as far as the perception of Arabs and Muslims in textbooks is concerned,

²² Robyn Creswell, cited above, elaborates on the immensely rich vocabulary of the Arabic language. He cites the Arabic word ‘*baww*’ (which rhymes with now) to illustrate the phenomenon of untranslatability in language. He gives several contexts wherein this one word could appear, and wraps nearly two pages worth of examples by wondering “how might one cover all this in English?” (pp. 447-448).

²³ See chapter 8 (‘*Eurocentrism*’) in Yves Gambier, *et al. Handbook of translation studies*. Volume 3, pp. 47-51. In the same chapter, Luc van Doorslaer cites Maria Tymoczko who defines Eurocentrism as a set of “ideas, perspectives and practices that initially originated in and became dominant in Europe, spreading from there to various other locations in the world, where in some places, such as the United States and the rest of the Americas, they have also become dominant” (p. 47).

²⁴ It must be admitted that that the quote from R.V. Leeuwen is incomplete, and risks distorting his major line of thought. It, in other words, does not reflect his overall argument in the same essay; namely, the fact that one needs to cease viewing the problematic of reception in purely Orientalist terms of a dominating and a dominant culture, and that “Arabic literature is systematically being marginalized through unyielding orientalism” (p. 25). For him, to approach the reception problematic solely from this angle is “to deny the dynamism inherent in cultural relationships,” and therefore “it is important not to seek the problems connected with translation of Arabic literature solely in Europe,” (p. 25), a position that the presentation seeks to confute.

A large study of European, African and American textbooks points to a paradox between a positive presentation of the contribution of Islamic civilization to the advancement of humanity, on the one hand, and a negative description of Islam as an archaic religion imposed by the sword through a "Holy War," which denies equal rights to women, promotes slavery and terrorism and is responsible for the underdevelopment of Muslim populations, on the other. (p. 446)

Hence, the representation of Arabs and Muslims, following the footpaths of the media, both print and broadcast, is also “‘info-biased’ rather than genuinely informative about Arabs and the Arab World” in both school textbooks and university syllabi, to paraphrase Kamal Abouchedid and Ramzi Nasser, whose paper on American college students’ attitudes towards Arabs along four dimensions: government, women, men, and Arabs in general speaks volumes about how American students are initiated into the life and culture of Arabs in an ‘info-biased’ manner, misrepresenting the latter and, by the same token, ‘Othering’ and ‘Orientalizing’ them.²⁵ It is worth noting here the fact that in general the Western reader tends to take in ‘info-biased’ data about the Arab world from the media, from textbooks as well as from school syllabi, all of which, I submit, finds substance within the framework of the academic imperialism that the West thrives on still.

As regards the last point, a practical study has been carried out by Sally Goma and Chad Raymond, titled "*Lost in non-translation: Politics of misrepresenting Arabs*," (2014) which explores the kinds of novels that often make their way through to university syllabi. Some of the findings that have been made by the two authors can be summed up as follows: To make their way through to translation and onto the American classroom, an Arabic novel should relate Arabic culture to such phenomena as violence, terrorism, and misogyny. As such, it needs to revolve around the kinds of stereotypes and beliefs about Arabs that those students have already been exposed to either in the media, print and broadcast, or in literature, such as Arabs are barbaric, or the Middle East is a place of fantasy and belly dancing. In order words, that novel should be read not for its aesthetic quality, but essentially as an ethnographic reference.

More interestingly is the fact that American college students can be sympathetic to the characters in those novels, and maybe even supportive of the novels’ overall vision, but they are likely not to do so, as Sally Goma and Chad Raymond suggest, simply because they have been fed so much info-biased information that their reading will be dictated by their horizon of expectation. Tresilian (2008) agrees with the point that “readers of translated works of foreign literature tend to respond best to works that fit in with their pre-existing tastes and interests” (p. 28). In this regard, it should be emphasized that literary/aesthetic taste can be constructed. Indeed, the perceived value a work of a literary work is a matter of whether it reinforces the dominant hegemony or not. If it does, several actors would then intervene to reinforce it, beginning with critics, who are often held in high esteem and whose opinion matters a great deal in directing readers’ interest in one type of literary production or another. Also, the lists of literary awards and Best-seller lists frequently guide readers to develop some specific taste for a particular literary genre or, broadly speaking, some type of literary writing, all of which usually finds reinforcing echoes through blogging or reader platforms such as *GoodReads* and

²⁵ See Kamal Abouchedid and Ramzi Nasser, “Info-bias mechanism and American college students’ attitudes towards Arabs.” *International Studies Perspectives* (2006) 7: 204-212.

LibraryThing, both of which implicitly direct readers' attention towards what is 'acceptable' in literature and what is not. And what is not deemed 'acceptable' is mummified, and repackaged for embargo.²⁶

A particularly relevant instance of cultural mummification here is the case of the Jordanian-born Saudi novelist Abd al- Rahman Munif (1933-2004), whose name floated in the 1980's as a candidate who was potentially more deserving of the Nobel Prize than Naguib Mahfuz, which could be adduced as an instance of the kind of negligence that the works of a prolific writer such as Munif could meet with, simply because he embraced ideas that were inimical to the powers to be in the Arab world, and most specifically countering the official narrative of the Saudi rulers, whom Munif considered as a *kleptocracy*; that is, a handful of corrupt leaders that use their power to exploit people and the natural resources. For this reason, and others that cannot be listed in the space of this paper, Munif has been under-translated, so to speak. As a matter of fact, by the mid-1980s, Munif had had only one or two of his novels translated into English. His first novel (*Al-ashjar wa-ghityal Mrzuq*) was published in 1973, and the first translation into English of one of his many works took place later in 1987, with the translation by Peter Theroux of the colossal quintet *Cities of salt*, of which only three volumes have been translated so far. Indeed, of the many works that Munif has produced within the span of thirty years, only five have been published in English. Indeed, his is an example of a rich legacy in Arabic fiction that has been mummified, left out in embargo. With no institutional support in sight, the situation is likely to remain so.

Paradoxically, the bulk of Munif's works, fictional as well as non-fictional ones, has been met with an obvious embargo, despite the fact that it is serious, sophisticated and variegated, indeed "the only serious work of fiction that tries to show the effect of oil, Americans and the local oligarchy on a Gulf country," as Edward Said says in his praise of this novel (1989/ Penguin edition). Viewed from another perspective, the negligence that Munif's works have been met with as far as translation into English is concerned only undermines this writer's strong wish to see the Arab world advancing towards democracy and modernization. The cultural, as well as social value of his works gets lost, and is made subject to the politics of selection and representation. And indeed one could argue that his case is not just one of embargo, but of epistemicide, a systematic annihilation of non-Western knowledge, as already pointed out.

Also, as already suggested, Abd al-Rahman Munif was for a long time not a favorite of Western publishers who, as I have argued throughout this thesis, only search for marketability and the bottom line, which is why they respond favorably to scholarly works that have been positively commented by readers. Munif, as I hope to have shown, does not fit in this category of

²⁶ In her 'Disciplinary divergences: Problematizing the field of Arabic literature' (2010), *Comparative Literature Studies*. Vol. 47, No. 4, Mara Naaman laments the fact that much of the existing literary critical output in Arabic is thrown into oblivion, and remains un-translated. She mentions 'Izz al-Din Ismail; Jabir 'Asfur, Mahmud al-Rabi; Sabry Hafez, Kamal Abu dib; Muhammad Miftah, Muhammad Barradah, Said Yaqtin, Faysal Darraj, to argue that their "works rarely circulate because few of them, the work of Hafez and Kilito excepted, are ever translated" (p. 459).

writers; he has been unjustly associated with what *The New Republic*, in a review of two of his novels, “Petrofiction,” an epithet that led Peter Theroux to lament the fact that

As the novel’s translator, I felt let down by the emphasis on oil instead of the story [*Cities of salt*]. I got used to it, though—the *Village Voice* would entitle a later Munif review “the Price of Oil,” and still later the *New Republic* reviewed two of his novels under the headline “Petrofiction” (. . .) his success in American publishing would come from documenting what Amitav Ghosh, writing in the *New Republic*, called “the Oil Encounter.”²⁷

Worse still are the highly biased and derogatory comments that John Updike wrote in connection with Abd al-Rahman Munif’s works of fiction. In *The New Yorker Book Review*, John Updike says in his review of *Cities of salt*, which he titles ‘*Satan’s work and silted cisterns*,’ says that “it is unfortunate, given the epic potential of his topic, that Mr. Munif appears to be . . . insufficiently Westernized to produce a narrative that feels much like what we call a novel.”²⁸ A statement such as this one clearly expresses a Eurocentric perspective, and is certainly an illustrative example of what Boaventura de Sousa Santos refers to in *Epistemologies* (2014) as ‘cognitive injustice’ where certain forms of knowledge are undermined, “marginalized[d], disregard[d], silence[d], condescend[d] to, and often violently eliminated[d]” (p. 121). It finds roots in a post-colonial “us” versus “them” attitude, and partakes of a hegemonic cultural framework that is “rooted in European history, European textual traditions, and European intellectual history, among other things,” one that is largely responsible for the state of embargo that I consider translation in the Arab world today to be a victim of, and that shows that a writer in the caliber of Abd al-Rahman Munif is but one of many victims of that embargo. As a general rule, literary production in the Arab world is hailed by the Western publishing industry only in so far as it pays lip serve to the West; otherwise, it is condemned, as is the case of Abdul-Rahman Munif and many others, to sit on the shelves of libraries, away from the look of reviewers and commentators. This situation is aptly expressed by Roger Allen in his *Translating Arabic literature* (2015):

Translations of Arabic literary texts are rarely subject to evaluation in general book reviews (such as those of New York, London, and the major national newspapers) or indeed in academic journals, and so they have little chance to engage the attention of a broader readership beyond the bounds of academe. (p. 166)

What may be gleaned from a statement by an authority on Arabic fiction is that up to the year 2015 at least, literature in the Arab world is confirmedly still in embargo. One could also safely describe Munif’s case as an instance of ‘epistemicide,’ which I have described earlier as the organized destruction of a science, or any other form of knowledge that for some reason is deemed undesirable. In this particular case, epistemicide takes the form of a censorship, a silencing of a discourse that emanates from an Arab writer who denounces a situation that the

²⁷ Retrieved from <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/abdelrahman-munif-and-the-uses-of-oil> Peter Theroux. Abdelrahman and the uses of oil. In *Words Without Borders*. October 2012 issue.

²⁸ Retrieved in http://sites.middlebury.edu/arbc210f14/files/2014/02/Book-Review_Cities-of-Salt.pdf John Updike. Satan’s work and silted cisterns. *The New Yorker*, 17 October 1988.

powers to be in the West are complicit with. It is *in fine* an interesting example of the way in which “Eurocentrism does not recognize a rival knowledge and thus cannot value it in the act of translation,” as Antonio Sousa Ribeiro has it in his illuminating essay “*Translation as a metaphor for our times: Post-colonialism, borders and identity* (2004, p. 191). The works of Abdul Rahman Munif are, be it noted, nothing but a drop in the ocean of a good number of serious literary works that include novels, autobiographies, sermons and other literary genres authored by Arab writers, and which have not had the ‘chance’ to be translated into English, published and read by a Western readership.

Indeed, “serious literature,” as M Lynx Qualey says in one of her blogs in *thenational.ae* “was all but invisible in English translation for most of the 20th century,” and even when a serious work of fiction gets published, it oftentimes gets “slapped down by unreceptive critics.”²⁹ The embargo, in this case, takes yet another form. It is not really a matter of what gets translated, and what does not, as much as it is a question of what gets bandied about, and marketed, and what does not. Even when they get translated (oftentimes dis-translated), most Arab authors are only briefly reviewed, and are soon ‘heard of no more.’ They are embargoed. To borrow Katayoun Zarei Toossi’s pertinent formulation in this connection from her essay “*The conundrum of the veil and Mohja Kahf’s literary representations of hijab*,” (2015) one can say that “the insistence on recycling and repackaging” (i.e. mummifying) these authors, with a view to embargoing them, “helps explain the nature of the contextual hurdles that rival narratives have to overcome in the present political landscape of Islam and the West” (p. 8). In this connection, Wail S. Hassan also pointedly says in his illuminating *Immigrant narratives: Orientalism and cultural translation in Arab American and Arab British literature* (2012) that the “narratives that cross discursive or ideological lines are censored altogether, if they cannot be remodeled and beaten into shape by editors” (p.36).

One way Arabic literature and language could break away from the Eurocentric power structures that keep ‘remodeling and beating [them] into shape’ could certainly be tried through the collective effort of all the academic/scientific institutions concerned, beginning with researchers and university professors, many of whom are already working towards decolonizing the university.³⁰ However, given the juggernaut cultural and academic (not to speak of financial) industry that grips these institutions, in addition to the firmly anchored colonial structures of knowledge that still haunt the walls of universities throughout the globe, it seems that the world knowledge economy (i.e. canon of thought) will still be the monopoly of some five Western powers whose ‘epistemic violence’ spares no one.³¹ Individual effort can; nonetheless, bear the

²⁹ See blog by D Lynx Qualey. Don’t judge books by their cover. Retrieved from <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/don-t-judge-books-by-their-cover-especially-arab-works-in-translation-1.656885>

³⁰ Note that the idea of ‘decolonizing the university’ initially took shape during the protestant movement--known as *Rhodes Must Fall*-- that began on 9 March 2015 demanding the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes, a British politician and businessman in Southern Africa, from the University of Cape Town. *Rhodes Must Fall* inspired other academic institutions and has led to a wider movement for the decolonization of the university. See Roseanne Chantiluke, et al (eds.) *Rhodes must fall: The struggle to decolonize the racist heart of empire* (2018). London: Zed Books. (Written by Rhodes Must Fall Oxford).

³¹ Reference is made here to Ramón Grosfoguel (Fall 2013) The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century. *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-knowledge*, XI, 1, pp. 73-90.

fruit of combating this violence. One recalls here the influential work that has been completed by the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o in this direction. After a career of many years as a novelist writing in English, Ngugi wa Thiong'o decides to return to his native language. An ostensibly small gesture such as this one has paid dividends in that it has drawn serious attention to the politics of language, how language is not just a means of communication, but a carrier of identity and of memory. Another case in point is the successful Algerian writer Ahlam Mosteghanemi, who refused to write in any language other than her own—Arabic—despite her mastery of the French language, for she holds a doctorate degree in Sociology (in French) from the Sorbonne (1982). All in all, it is undeniable that individual effort needs collective support, and vice versa. What matters the most; however, is that anyone impacted by some form of epistemic violence that results from an alienating global system should remember Frantz Fanon's calling in the conclusion to *The wretched of the earth* (1963) that the Third World leave Europe behind and forge a new path for itself: "Come, then, comrades, the European game has finally ended; we must find something different. We today can do everything, so long as we do not imitate Europe, so long as we are not obsessed by the desire to catch up with Europe."

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About the author:

Sanaa Abouzaid (1972-) has been serving since 2004 as an assistant professor of English at Ibn Zohr University, Agadir. She holds a Master's degree in Translation Studies from Salford University, U.K. (2002). She has completed her doctoral dissertation at Mohammed V University, Rabat, Morocco, and her *viva voce* is scheduled for December 2019. Her research interests include Translation and Cultural Studies.

abouzaid@sana@gmail.com