

Anglo-American Voyeurism and Translated Arab Women's writings

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(Received 2 / 9 / 2009. Accepted 16 / 11 / 2009)

□ ABSTRACT □

In this paper, an attempt is being made to shed light on how frequently Anglo-American Arabists, translators, and commentators have dealt with translated Arab women's writings from a voyeuristic perspective, satisfying the Western reader's negative and preconceived attitudes towards the Arab world. According to several specialists, one of the main objectives of translation is to manipulate literature in order to acquire a new function in the target-culture. This manipulation is examined with specific reference to a number of translated Arab women's writings. Besides, they have also been used to serve the prevalent Western feminist discourse on both the literary and ideological levels. All in all, they have given the Anglo-American literary circles a pretext to look down at the allegedly inferior Arab culture.

Key Words: Translated Arab women writings, manipulation of literary fame, feminism

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التلصُّص الأنكلو- أمريكي وأعمال الكاتبات العربيات المترجمة

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(تاريخ الإيداع 2 / 9 / 2009. قبل للنشر في 16 / 11 / 2009)

□ ملخص □

يتضمَّن هذا البحثُ محاولةً لإلقاء الضوء على كيفية قيام المستعربين، والمترجمين، والمعلقين الأنكلو-أمريكيين، بشكلٍ متواتر، بتناول أعمال الكاتبات العربيات المترجمة من منظور تلصُّص (فضولي)، يرضي مواقف القارئ الغربي المسبقة والسلبية حيال العالم العربي. ويرى عددٌ من المختصين أنَّ أحد مرامي الترجمة يتجلَّى في التلاعب بالأدب لكي يتَّخذ وظيفةً جديدةً في ثقافة المستقر. كما يتمُّ رصد هذا التلاعب بالإحالة إلى حفنةٍ من أعمال الكاتبات العربيات المترجمة، التي تمَّ استعمالها، علاوةً على ذلك، لخدمة الخطاب الغربي النسوي السائد على صعيدي الأيديولوجيا والأدب. ومنحت [تلك الأعمال المترجمة]، على وجه الإجمال، الأوساط الأدبية الأنكلو-أمريكية ذريعةً أخرى للنظر باستعلاء إلى الثقافة العربية الدونية افتراضاً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أعمال الكاتبات العربيات المترجمة/ التلاعب بالشهرة الأدبية/ النسوية

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Introduction:

In this paper, an attempt is being made to shed light on how, more often than not, Anglo-American Arabists, translators, and commentators have subjected translated Arab women's writings to a voyeuristic perspective, satisfying the Western reader's preconceived attitudes towards the Arab world. In the view of specialists, translation is simply a re-writing of an original text, reflecting a particular 'ideology' or 'poetics'. Thus, one of its main objectives is to manipulate literature in order to acquire a new function in a new target society (culture). This function is twofold: on the one hand it services power and on the other hand contributes to the evolution of a particular literature.⁽¹⁾ In this exercise translators or rewriters usually 'adapt, manipulate the originals they work with to some extent, usually to make them fit with the dominant ideological and poetological currents of their time'.⁽²⁾ This manipulation is studied in this paper with specific reference to the translation of Arab women's writings on both shores of the Atlantic. These writings are simply translated to cater for an Anglo-American literary taste, coloured with negative stereotypical pre-conceived notions about the Arab World. Besides, they have served the Western feminist ideology and literary movement prevalent on the Anglo-American scene. All in all, they have simply been manipulated by the Anglo-American circles to look down at the allegedly inferior Arab culture viz-a-viz the so-called superior Western culture.

Objectives:

This paper aims at shedding light on the complexities of the reception of translated literary works in the target culture. It is a unique acculturation process, involving varied ideological, literary and cultural discourses. In this respect, the reception of translated Arab women's writings in the Anglo-American context provides striking examples. The current paper attempts to trace this multi-dimensional literary phenomenon.

Method:

The current writer has assembled several theoretical critical works, literary reviews and introductions to translated writings by Arab women writers. The discourses prevalent in the above-mentioned works are highlighted, deconstructed and analyzed, in line with the paper's main thesis: translated Arab women's writings have been viewed by Anglo-American scholars and critics as sociological and political case studies, manipulated in favour of enhancing the vigorous feminist literary movement and the Anglo-American reader's view of the Arab World as an exotic and inferior culture.

Body:

Given the vigorous and flourishing feminist literary trend in the West, women related issues in the Third World have continued to enjoy intensive coverage by academic feminists (mostly women). The Western media has also advocated the afore-mentioned brand of feminism, and highlighted Third-World cultural and social attitudes that do not fit in with such a feminist framework. Oddly enough, some Moslem circles that view Islam as being justly and unquestionably in favour of women's subordination to their male counterparts, have provided Western feminists with strong evidence to dub the Arab World, with Islam at the core of its cultural identity, as being chronically misogynistic.

⁽¹⁾ Susan Bassnett, 'General Editor's Preface', *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, Anrew Lefevere (London: Routledge, 1992), p.vii.

⁽²⁾ Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and Manipulation of Literary Fame*, p.8.

Despite the fact that the translation movement of modern Arabic literature is a fairly new phenomenon on the Anglo-American literary scene, going back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, one would notice that the feminist, more than any other discourse, be it comparative, aesthetical or multi-cultural, was soon to dominate this movement, with its preconceived formulas and vigorous tone. This has set on track a whole wave of translating Arab women's writings. As a result, these works have acquired a new function in the target culture. Ironically, some of them, having had a poor showing in the source Arabic language, have been transformed at the hands of feminists into alleged marketable masterpieces in the target language. Most importantly, they have been reviewed by literary heavy weights in the mainstream press, a luxury that has been denied to the translated works of Arab male writers. A striking example in this respect is *Opening the Gates*, an anthology containing essays, short stories and poems by Arab feminists (women only). In her review of this book, the renowned Nobel-Laureate Doris Lessing addresses a host of issues related to the cultural interaction or antagonism between the Arab World and the West. That the book is a piece of 'Arab feminist writing', Lessing maintains, may put off some English readers. She also raises awareness of the plight brought about by Islamic tradition in the past and the spread of "*fundamentalism*" recently. Then, she reaches the conclusion that the book is not an enjoyable read for many Western women –or some of their Moslem counterparts– for at its center is a depiction of non-Western societies, whose moral and cultural standards are unacceptable from a Western perspective. The following extract is illustrative in this regard:

Societies where a woman can risk rejection by her family for refusing to wear the veil; or where it is a progressive thing to lecture midwives on the necessity for leaving a third of the clitoris when they perform clitoridotomy since otherwise women "lose their fire and become apathetic"; or where (but this is much wider than Islam) a girl suffers well-meant or cruel tyranny from mother-in-law, or husband– these countries deserve to be called prisons. ⁽³⁾

This tirade of cultural stereotyping and sweeping is hardly surprising given the historical and socio-cultural factors enhancing it. Brought into the equation is the presence of Moslem communities in the West to be seen as barbaric', the fact that makes some Western intellectuals fall back 'into a way of thinking appropriate to the long wars between Saracens and Christians: we had hundreds of years of these wars and our minds fall easily into that pattern'.⁽⁴⁾ This plain statement stressing the Crusade mentality deeply rooted in traditions stretching centuries back reflects a stumbling block to any Anglo-American Arab acculturation. As a result, Arab/Moslem culture seems to have been subjected to misunderstanding or misrepresentation in terms of women-related issues as below illustrated.

The reviewed anthology is then admirable for 'It can be read as literature, as sociology: let us hope that soon it will be read as history. If our children are still being taught to read literature in our schools, perhaps some of those stories could be introduced to them, as a way of understanding people in our country as well as places they visit as tourists'.⁽⁵⁾ Striking in this conclusion is the fact that translated Arab women's literary works are being appreciated as history and sociology, rather than good works of literature.

⁽³⁾ Doris Lessing, 'Solitary Heroines in Crowded Restaurants' [Review of *Opening the Gates*, ed. Margot Badran & Miriam Cooke (London, Virago, 1990)], *The Independent*, 7 July, 1990.

⁽⁴⁾ Ibid.

⁽⁵⁾ Ibid.

They are being simply treated as sociological study-cases by feminists. For example, in an informative review, Fadwa Malti-Douglas stresses some Western stereotypes with regard to Arab/Moslem women. Books on this group draw verbally and visually upon the association of Arab/Moslem women with the veil. Malti-Douglas argues that titles such as '*Veil of Shame*' play 'upon the association, usually one of mystery and exoticism, transforming it dramatically into one of disgrace'.⁽⁶⁾

A favourite star among Arab writers into English is Nawal Assadawi, whose novels and even plays have been translated into English as well as other Western languages and reviewed by feminists as literary masterpieces. Rachel Steir's commentary on the French translation of one of Assadawi's masterpieces [in her view] illustrates what might be termed as cultural voyeurism. The reviewer has gone to an extravagant length stressing Assadawi's victimization by both the Sadat Regime and the so-called Moslem 'fundamentalists.' Her passionate and extremely impressionistic tone is self-evident. 'Assadawi's only play, *Al-Insan* (*The People* (*sic.*) -1982) brutally attacks fundamentalism's implicit promise to empower women'.⁽⁷⁾ This exaggerated and un-academic style enhances a rigid epistemological line of discourse stressing the East-West contrast, for what is deemed inappropriate in Egypt is bound to be worthy of attention and praise in the West: '*Al-Insan* functions as a two-pronged political manifesto, addressing Egyptians and more global audience'.⁽⁸⁾ That *Al-Insan* is no more than a political manifesto is hardly in need of proof. Yet, introducing it to the English-speaking reader as a piece of modern Arabic drama can, simply and understandably, be viewed as a case of intended manipulation of literary fame. Oppression of the male and female Arab citizens alike, a common practice in the Arab World, is hardly surprising; a theme frequently and to deadly effects dealt with by major dramatists such as Alfred Faraj and Sa'dallah Wannous to name but a few. However, at the time of Steir's review none of such outstanding writers had been given the slightest of Anglo-American attention. Steir concludes: 'An English translation and production of *Al-Insan* could narrow the epistemological chasm between East and West, underlining the importance of a system that allows all writers to speak'.⁽⁹⁾

This partly feminist partly Eurocentric rhetoric, frequently encountered in many reviews, undermines the aesthetical and literary side of East-West acculturation, enhancing a Westo-centered stance, coloured with self-righteousness and cultural voyeurism. It is in other words a continuity of a well-established Western academic discourse, inventing the fantasized 'other' in line with rigidly drawn lines, no matter how epistemologically profoundless they might be.

Unlike Western feminists, Anglophile Arab scholars have been skeptical about Assadawi's stature as an 'allegedly' prominent writer on the Anglo-American literary scene. A good example in this respect is Sabri Hafez's study of Assadawi's narratives. 'The translation of her narrative works –I hesitate to call them novels– into English in one year is indicative of her success in the West, or at least of the success of feminist solidarity in influencing both the reading public and the publishing trade... She is more interested in the Western rather than in the Arab reader'.⁽¹⁰⁾ It is hardly surprising then that apart from

⁽⁶⁾ Fedwa Malti-Douglas, 'View of Arab Women: Society, Text, and Critic' [Review article of *Veil of Shame: The Role of Women in the Contemporary Fiction of North Africa and the Arab World*, Evelyn Acad Sherbrooke (Quebec: Editions Naaman, 1978)], *Edebiyat* iv, 2 (1979), p.236.

⁽⁷⁾ Rachel Shteir, 'Breaking the Silence: Nawal Assadawi's *Al-Insan*', *Theatre* 20, part 1 (1988), p.47.

⁽⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, pp.47-8.

⁽⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, p.48.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Sabry Hafez, 'Intentions and Reakizations in the Narratives of Nawal El-Sa'dawi', *Third World Quarterly* ii, 3 (July, 1989), p.89.

Mahfouz, Assadawi -and to some extent Hanan Al-Shaykh- is the most translated Arab writer in the English Language.

A cornerstone in Anglo-American studies on Lebanese literature, Cooke's *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* has elaborated the feminist perspective of war and violence and has been frequently quoted and reviewed by scholars. Central in Cooke's argument is the fact that women's writings are more accurate than those of their male counterparts in narrating the dailiness of war, by eschewing the big abstract logic of political discourse and focusing on everyday life slight details.⁽¹¹⁾ Cooke's frequently used 'Beirut Decentrists' indicates a group of women writers stationed in the self-destructing Beirut and moving in separate spheres:

They were alone and for themselves. They would not conceive of their writings as related to those of others, yet their marginal perspective, which gave insight into the holistic aspect of the war, united them and allowed them discursively to undermine and restructure society around the image of a new center.⁽¹²⁾

Cooke is after a female mythologizing of the war experience, whereby the ordinary and mundane is transformed into an alternative narrative to the grand and sublime associated with the allegedly traditional male voice, the perpetrator of war and violence. One of the gaps in Cooke's thesis is overlooking two important dimensions of the cultural and historical Lebanese experience. In the Words of Sabah Ghandour:

To overlook Beirut's intellectual role in the Middle East and to emphasize one aspect only – the political "playground"– results in a distorted picture of the literature of the "Beirut Decentrists," a group whose emergence would not have been possible had not been for the intellectual climate of Beirut.⁽¹³⁾

This one sidedness in analyzing a literary phenomenon leads any scholar to the trap of ideological or theoretical rigidity, whereby a pre-conceived intellectual framework prevails at the expense of scholarly objectivity. Misgiving though this point might look, it fits within the feminist ideological formula.

Of Cooke's 'Beirut Decentrists' I am going to focus on Hanan Al-Shaykh, Emily Nasrallah, and Ghadah Al-Samman given that the other listed decentrists' output was not originally written in Arabic or did not leave the big impact as that of the aforementioned ones. Undoubtedly, Hanan Al-Shaykh's stature on the Anglo-American scene is by all standards outstanding. Most of her novels and short story collections are available in English translations, printed by major publishing houses. Unlike other Arab writers, apart from Mahfouz, she has enjoyed a high profile through interviews and studies. On the face of it, this attention would give the impression that the Anglo-American appreciation of modern Arabic literature is entering a flourishing and appreciative phase, but careful examination of Al-Shaykh's reception would soon dash this optimism. In the first place, Al-Shaykh's works are marketable for the simple reason that they feed Western curiosity about Arab and Muslim womanhood and help a rigidly feminist literary school indulge in its preconceived ideological discourse. According to Cooke, Al-Shaykh's importance lies

⁽¹¹⁾ Miriam Cooke, *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.3.

⁽¹²⁾ Ibid., p.3.

⁽¹³⁾ Sabah Ghandour, [Review] 'Miriam Cooke, *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987)', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22, 3 (1990), p.356.

in the fact that she employs 'a language that some labeled inappropriate, unnecessary and certainly unladylike'; by so doing she challenges the restrictions of conservative society and 'boldly and uninhibitedly writes of woman's sexual gratification'.⁽¹⁴⁾ This apparently bold and explicit treatment of sex, as a central theme, is what seemed to have attracted Anglo-American translators and scholars alike. It is also the reason behind censoring Al-Shaykh's books in several Arab countries, another factor arousing interest among her Anglo-American reviewers.⁽¹⁵⁾

Another question raised by reviewers is Al-Shaykh's intended audience. Is her *The Story of Zahra*, for instance, addressed to Lebanon, the Islamic World or outside? According to Charles R. Larson, this issue reflects 'Al-Shaykh's dilemma as a woman novelist within an Arabic context, faithfully attempting to write of the world as she knows it. Her subject matter quite naturally becomes that of women in a patriarchy, and that alone can often guarantee a limited readership in many areas of the Third World'.⁽¹⁶⁾ Al-Shaykh's subtle novels, their controversial themes, and the Western interest they aroused, are all notions worthy of further examination. One would, however, be inclined to partly accept the view that Al-Shaykh's works are good translation material according to Western intellectual criteria of highlighting gender-centered narratives.

In mainstream Western discourse, highlighting women related issues in arts is a manifestation of feminism, as a literary and ideological tool designed to redress the balance linguistically at least in favour of the oppressed sex. Yet this straightforward concept may not necessarily be applicable to gender-centered narratives emerging in non-Western source cultures of the, allegedly, 'static' Islamic East. The fact that Al-Shaykh's female protagonists are passive, manipulated, acted upon, second-class citizens, politically and economically helpless individuals, poses a serious question to standard feminist discourse.⁽¹⁷⁾ In this respect, it is difficult to trace the feminist voice in the fabric of *The Story of Zahra*. Referring to Zahra's behaviour, Cooke maintains: 'It was her sublimation of her solitude which allowed her to challenge the war on its own turf. Her mistake was to hope that the logic of bullets could be made to prevail beyond the bullets'.⁽¹⁸⁾ One wonders whether Zahra's sexual affair with the sniper is a manifestation of her newly discovered identity as an active member of her society or of her newly won freedom. Although involving a degree of independent personal choice, on a broader level, it can be seen as a sign of submission to the evil side represented by the sniper. On her part Al-Shaykh has rejected being labeled as feminist for, by so doing, she will narrow her creative energies to one idea.⁽¹⁹⁾

Her first showing on the Anglo-American scene was through the translation of *The Story of Zahra*, which was favourably received by Anglo-American commentators as a daring novel challenging Arabo-Islamic patriarchy and highlighting the plight of Arab Moslem women. The literary or artistic merit of the novel was apparently overlooked in favour of enhancing a preconceived Western 'Orientalist' discourse on the fantasized and exotic Islamic East. The woman protagonist fits the bill of a typical oppressed Muslim woman, worthy of the Western reader's sympathy. Paul Edwards stresses its banning in

⁽¹⁴⁾ Ibid, p.59.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Charles R. Larson, 'The Fiction of Hanan Al-Shaykh, Reluctant Feminist', *World Literature Today* 65, 1 (Winter 1991), p.15.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Ibid., p.15.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Ibid., p.15.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Cooke, *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War*, p.59.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Hanan Al-Shaykh, 'An Interview with Hanan Al-Shaykh', Paula W. Sunderman, *I Sweep The Sun off Rooftop*, tr. Denys Johnson Davies (et. al.) (St Leonard: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd, 1994), pp.5-6.

several Arab countries and its being 'a slur to Islamic womanhood' then goes on to conclude that the novel 'works within a psychological paradigm likely to be more familiar to Western readers than it is to the guardians of morality in the Middle East'.⁽²⁰⁾ Buzzwords grounded in the target reader's vocabulary are strongly present in this review. Moreover, its stereotypical resonances are emphasized to market *The Story of Zahra* as a subversive narrative in the source culture.

Al-Shaykh's second novel in English translation, *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, is another sensually structured narrative with the issue of sex cutting through all its layers. The novel is apparently set in a fictionalized Gulf country where women's movement is extremely restricted. The four female protagonists seem to have devised amazing survival strategies. Of the four, Nur seems to be the most eye-catching for her love affair with both men and women alike: 'In one of the final images the author presents of her, Nur is dressed as a man, coming to visit Suha, with whom she has had an earlier liaison. Is this the ultimate freedom of an Arabic woman: assuming the identity (sexual or otherwise) of a man'?⁽²¹⁾ This image may strike a responsive cord among the target culture readership through its sensuous and lesbian explicitness. It is a powerful depiction of direct sexuality in a traditionally patriarchal society. In this social milieu, therefore, concludes Al-Shaykh, sex is the main obsession of women, either to prevent it from happening or to make it happen. It is also the most important issue to the male family members who are the self-appointed guards of chastity that may cost the women their lives.⁽²²⁾

The second of the so-called "Beirut Decentrists", Emily Nasrallah, was introduced to Anglo-American readership through her famous translated novel *Flight Against Time*. Clearly, Nasrallah is denied the favourable Anglo-American luxury of praise and high profile allocated to Al-Shaykh. Her works seem to be out of favour with the Anglo-American publishing industry that needs more sensational stuff to feed its readership's curiosity about Arab-Muslim womanhood. This lack of interest does not indeed belittle Nasrallah's stature as one of the Arab world's leading women writers but rather illustrates the still rigidly functioning Western preconceptions about Arab culture. At the center of *Flight Against Time* is the issue of immigration, a significant feature of the Lebanese experience, as illustrated in the introduction: 'While a beacon to neighboring peoples, Lebanon has exported its own people for centuries as well. Lebanese ventured for trade, political conquest or to escape domestic upheaval'.⁽²³⁾ The 1975-1990 Civil War is the background against which the novel is set. This does not indicate, however, that it is confined to the issue of war, for it broadly addresses universal concerns, such as affection to loved ones absent by distance not by death, the love of parents to their children and vice-versa, despite two decades of separation. According to Suad Joseph: 'In a world of global migrations, no one can be untouched by stories of separation, yearning for loved ones far away, and nostalgia for a time when parents, children, family, friends and neighbors lived in a small world of integrity and dignity'.⁽²⁴⁾ In the words of Miriam Cooke there are 'Two dreams in reality that war has come to disturb, showing the villager that the emigrant was not necessarily wildly successful, and that he was unlikely to return; showing the emigrant

⁽²⁰⁾ Paul Edwards, 'The Education of Gideon Chase', *London Review of Books* (5 June 1986), pp.20-1.

⁽²¹⁾ Larson, 'The Fiction of Hanan Al-Shaykh, Reluctant feminist', p.17.

⁽²²⁾ Al-Shaykh, 'An Interview with Hanan Al-Shaykh', p.13

⁽²³⁾ Suad Joseph, 'Introduction', *Flight Against Time*, Emily Nasrallah, Trs. Issa J. Boullata (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1997), p.v.

⁽²⁴⁾ Ibid., p.vii

that the dream of the return is no more than a dream'.⁽²⁵⁾ *Flight Against Time* seemed to have been appreciated mainly for its theme of war and immigration, and so far has not aroused interest among Anglo-American scholars as a good literary piece. The previous comments have apparently confined it to the sociological domain. The third 'decentrist' Ghadah Alasamman's translated works will be discussed along with those of other Syrian women writers in the final parts of this study.

Like their counterparts in other parts of the Arab world, Palestinian women writers have aroused interest among Anglo-American scholars. Some of their novels were translated and academically discussed in mainly feminist-oriented studies. In her introduction to Liana Badr's *The Eye of the Beholder*, Fadia Faqir, an Anglophone Arab writer and champion of the Western hardcore brand of feminism, spares no effort in asserting what she views as an alternative narrative of traditional Arab misogyny. An editor of the prestigious Arab Women Writers Series, she has expressed her objective along Westo-centered lines:

Women writers in this series create a different language where the patriarch is lampooned and ridiculed, and where women's daily experiences and oral culture are placed at the center of the discourse. Rejecting the standard perceptions about masculine and feminine language these women writers have created a third space within the language from which they can question a culture which has been based on exclusion, division and misrepresentation of women's experiences.⁽²⁶⁾

In this commentary all the ingredients the Western reader would associate with Arab culture are vigorously stated and the work is marketed as a Western feminist statement against a backward indigenous misogynistic culture. This statement is an extremely straight-jacket and mechanical in applying feminist Western discourse in an inappropriate Arab context. Unlike the afore-mentioned 'Orientalist' perspective in commenting on Lian Badr's *The Eye of the Mirror*, Amal Amireh has avoided sweeping feminist generalizations, stuck to the narrative, developing into a "panoramic" survey, which led to sacrificing depth of characterization for breadth of social coverage.⁽²⁷⁾

Similarly, Iraqi women writers have prominently featured through Anglo-American translations and reviews, given that their narratives fit in with the Western feminist framework. The first novel derived from Arabic literature in Iraq to be translated into English is Alia Mamdouh's *Mothball*, in which the protagonist and narrator Huda relates the turbulent developments in the life of a traditional Iraqi family with an absent father, in the era preceding the overthrow of the monarchy and declaration of the Iraqi Republic in 1958. In the background are major events such as anti-British demonstrations and the Nationalization of the Suez Canal by Gamal Abdul Naser. According to Hussein Kadhim 'The work relies heavily on the interior-monologue technique and is characterized by a frequent switching of the spatial and temporal frames of reference. With regard to language, the author employs a mixture of standard Arabic and colloquial Iraqi speech'.⁽²⁸⁾

⁽²⁵⁾ Miriam Cooke, *Wars' Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War*, p.156

⁽²⁶⁾ Fadia faqir, 'Introduction', *The Eye of the Mirror*, Liana Badr, tr. Samira Kavar (Reading: Garnet, 1994), p.ix.

⁽²⁷⁾ Amal Amireh, [Review] 'Liana Badr, *The Eye of the Mirror*, tr. Samira Kavar, intro. Fadia Faqir (Reading: Garnet, 1995)', *World Literature Today* 70, 2 (Spring 1996), p.461.

⁽²⁸⁾ Hussein Kadhim, [Review] 'Alia Mamdouh, *Mothball*, tr. Peter Theroux, intro. Fadia Faqir, (Reading: Garnet, 1996)', *World Literature Today* 71, 4 (Autumn 1997), p.557.

Mamdouh's novel is published in Garnet Arab Women Writers Series which is welcome news in Khazim's view. However, he has rightly cautioned against the series-editor's introduction and her sweeping remarks that would likely do more damage than good for the cause of promoting modern Arabic literature on the Anglo-American scene. Interesting amongst such remarks is the following, which is likely to enhance Western curiosity about Arab-Islamic life style 'Alia Mamdouh draws her world with precision. Evocative descriptions of public feasts, weddings, public baths, bazaars and folklore punctuate the narrative'.⁽²⁹⁾ These buzz-words are part of the traditional Western stock-preconception of the Arab and Islamic, being marketed here by an Anglophile Arab eager to please her voyeuristic audience. Traditionally, the Arab East has been associated with exotic locations, functioning as no more than stock folkloric images engraved in the Western reader's mind. Moreover, other statements by Faqir did not go down well with some scholars. Due to the sensitivity of the issue I am going to cite the reviewer's view verbatim: 'Charges that Arabic is inadequate to present religious and social experiences are not new, of course. They have sometimes been politically motivated. More often, as in the case of Faqir, they are made to justify an ignorance of Arabic'.⁽³⁰⁾ Regardless of Faqir's motives behind such remarks, the case has regrettably remained that Arabic has in many cases been belittled and undermined. The editor's ignorance of Arabic is, in the current writer's view, a bit of exaggeration. The more likely motive is Faqir's desire to appease the cultural and racial prejudices of her Anglo-American audience about Arabo-Islamic culture.

Another surprising breakthrough in this vein is Daisy Al-Amir's translated short-story collection *The Waiting List*, which is presented in an unusual manner. The writer has been given a considerable space to give a self-promoting testimony on her career and work, attending to the slightest details such as the print numbers of each of her books, something that looks bizarre and hardly matters to the reader. That was of course the first part of the testimony composed in Baghdad 1989, with the second part being an update written in Beirut 1994. In a style of self-centered mega stars, Al-Amir presents herself as an independent woman, breaking with traditional society, living on her own for twenty-five years in Beirut as an employee at the Iraqi Embassy. Also depicted in her narcissistic statement are her travels to several countries including, of course, the dreamed of U.S.A: 'My love of life, my strength in bearing its difficulties, my personal independence, my discoveries of life's secrets—these were my capital. What is left to me from these funds by which I knew myself and by which others knew me?'⁽³¹⁾ The attractive ingredients of Western feminism are present in Al-Amir's rhetoric, although it, to some extent, contradicts the title's connotation stressing the issue of women's alienation. More surprising still is Mona Mikhail's introduction comprised of brief statements, referring to major male Iraqi writers in passing and praising particular women writers as megastars⁽³²⁾. This style of introducing foreign women writers is, in the current writer's view, intended to enhance both rigid feminist discourse and 'manipulation of literary fame', in order to gratify the target audience's literary taste.

⁽²⁹⁾ Fadia Faqir, 'Introduction', *Mothball*, Alia Mamdouh, tr. Peter Theraux (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 1996), p.VI.

⁽³⁰⁾ Khadhim, [Review] 'Alia Mamdouh, *Mothball*', p.557.

⁽³¹⁾ Daisi Al-Amir, 'Author's Preface', *The Waiting List: An Iraqi Woman's Tales of Alienation*, tr. Brbara Parmenter, intro. Mona Mikhail (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p.xii.

⁽³²⁾ Mona Mikhail, 'Introduction', *The Waiting List: An Iraqi Woman's Tales of Alienation*, pp.2-3.

Likewise, Syrian women novelists have had noticeable presence on the Anglo-American literary scene. A handful of their novels were available in English translations and studies on them were conducted. On the academic level, Gaddah al-Samman's life and works were in-depth discussed in a treatise by Hanan Awwad, an Arab scholar writing in English. The importance of this study lies in the fact that al-Samman has not been viewed as, merely, another woman novelist haranguing the reader with feminist rhetoric, but rather as a talented writer having a strong grasp of the socio-political reality in the Arab world, and calling for a comprehensive change that will eventually and automatically improve women status. Equally important is Al-Samman's stressed artistic originality, reflected through her ambitiously accomplished novels. According to Awwad, Al-Samman's career is divided into two phases. Her first works focus on universal themes such as death, love, religion, sex, East-West cultural differences, and class awareness; and in her later works well to 1975, Al-Samman concentrates on the 1967 defeat 'its cause, consequences, and the lessons to be drawn from it', then comments on 'the antiquated structure of Arab society'.⁽³³⁾

Compared to this recognized presence on the academic level, Al-Samman's impact on the translation level is far from impressive. Three of her works are available in English translation. Yet, response to them has, oddly enough, not convincingly materialized. Al-Samman's first translated novel *Beirut 75*, unlike those of other Arab women novelists, has been modestly received. Jozeph Zeidan stresses the theme of this novel in which 'Al-Samman shows a keen eye for exposing the social, political, and economic failings of Lebanese society. All these weaknesses are obviously an ideal recipe for a civil war, which indeed erupted a month after the book was published'.⁽³⁴⁾ The novel's impressive characterization, graceful style, and experimental narrative have all been relegated to second place in favour of underlining its socio-political dimension. It is not tipped as a good piece of writing relevant to readers in both the source and target language. *The Square Moon*, referred to as supernatural tales, has been also given little if any attention. The only one of Al-Samman's translated novels to be commented on as an accomplished literary work is *Beirut's Nightmares*. To Zeidan, the use of the nightmare technique 'frees the author from the restrictions of chronological time. The whole experience is filtered through the heroine's nightmares that, being dreams, do not have to conform to the fixed rhythm of objective time. In the novel subjective time is real, despite the many references to the outside flow of events'.⁽³⁵⁾ The novel is indeed an outstanding experimental narrative, delivered in a rich poetic style, depicting basic human emotions, worries and instincts during traumatizing times exposing human vulnerability. As the war drags on the heroine finds herself behaving like a man, having become tough-minded and independent. According to Zeidan, in this novel and perhaps in other works by Al-Samman, this feature undermines the author's feminist cause.⁽³⁶⁾ Being the multi-faceted novelist she is, Al-Samman is difficult to fall into a specific pattern of discourse in the target culture: she refuses to be a one-sided feminist novelist, delves into the socio-political reality in Arab society without falling into the trap of sloganeering and, more importantly, never confines

⁽³³⁾ Hanan Awwad, *Arab Causes in the Fiction of Ghadah Al-Samman 1961-1975* (Quebec: Sherbrooke, 1983), pp.112-3.

⁽³⁴⁾ Joseph T. Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1995), p197.

⁽³⁵⁾ Ibid, p.204.

⁽³⁶⁾ Ibid., p.193.

herself to any ideological or artistic trend. This literary diversity has unfortunately cut no ice with mainstream literary pundits in the target culture.

Unlike Al-Samman's translated works, Ulfat Idilbi's *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* has been given considerable attention. Set in the 1920s, the novel, through a story within a story technique, a diary line framework, depicts the intrigues within a middle-class Damascene family against the background of French occupation and national resistance. Central in the novel is the protagonist Sabriya who, having been denied love and proper education, commits suicide at the end. Issa Peters has underlined two points that are likely to attract the target reader's attention to the theme 'of middle-class women, with their drudgery, self-sacrifice, frustration, and humiliation', coupled with the 'author's ability to portray in detail Damascene local color, particularly the description of the Sufi rituals of the Melevi brotherhood'.⁽³⁷⁾ The ingredients of a favourable work in Anglo-American terms are all available in Idilbi's narrative. An exotic Eastern setting coloured with mystic rituals, a sensational tragic end of an oppressed Muslim woman as well as bashing at an allegedly backward culture, have all guaranteed Idilbi a very sympathetic reception. This is demonstrated through the mainstream press in a typically sensational manner. In a review entitled 'Doomed Love in a Moslem World', Joan Smith boasts that Ulfat Idilbi is 'Syria's most celebrated living novelist', then praises the novel 'which focuses... on the dilemma faced by women in the Moslem world', before moving on to associate Idilbi with Assa'dawi's and Al-Shaykh's 'feminism'.⁽³⁸⁾

Less known than both Al-Samman and Idilbi is Sammar 'Attar who has been outside Syria since the 1970s and hardly known to Syrian or Arab readers. Published originally in Arabic in 1982, her *Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl* was translated by the author and published in 1995. Central in this novel is the protagonist's (Lina) adventures from childhood to maturity. Through the omniscient narrator, Lina's feelings and thoughts are detailed. Following her father's death, Lina suffers from her brother's male bullying. Of course, he is not the only male victimizer in her life but one of many: the teacher, the university lecturer, the cleric, and the politician. Having tried to find liberation through an alternative progressive group, Lina also gets disillusioned by male dominance. Like her older sister, she leaves the country and, predictably, finds refuge in the west. To Issa J. Boullata 'The reader meanwhile is treated to vividly described scenes from Damascene life and traditions in the 1950s and is made to feel the suffocating atmosphere of an autocratic regime and repressive society'.⁽³⁹⁾ Again the favourite stuff of Eastern exoticism and Islamic misogyny features prominently in this translated novel that can easily fit into stock Western cultural discourse on Arab culture. Being one-sided and punctuated with feminist sloganeering, it is likely to function as good material for Anglo-American voyeurism.

⁽³⁷⁾ Issa Peters, [Review] 'Ulfat Idilbi. *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet*, tr. Peter Clark (Brooklyn: Interlink, 1997)', *World Literature Today* 72, 1 (Winter 1998), p.199.

⁽³⁸⁾ Joan Smith, 'Doomed Love in a Moslem World', *The Financial Times*, 4 November 1995.

⁽³⁹⁾ Iss J. Boullata, [Review] "Samar Attar. *Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl*. Colorado Springs: Three Continents", *World Literature Today* 69, 4 (Autumn 1995), pp.863-4.

Conclusion:

In the light of the previously considered works, Arab women's translated writings have considerably continued to excite Anglo-American readers, and attract the attention of scholars, translators, publishers and commentators. These writings, particularly novels, were published by major Anglo-American publishing houses and reviewed in the mainstream press, and then studied within academic circles. This notwithstanding, the Anglo-American reception in this respect has, more often than not, been permeated with an ardent feminist discourse, manipulating the translated works' literary fame, and transforming them into launching pads to bash the so-called Arab-Islamic misogyny, maintaining a stance of cultural superiority, and feeding a voyeuristic attitude towards an allegedly exotic culture.

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