On The Politics of Arabic Literary Translation

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Abstract

This paper examines the external factors influencing the selection and reception of literary texts in translation, with a focus on the representation of Arab culture in the West. Drawing on Andre Lefevere's (1992) concept of patronage, the author discusses how patrons, including institutions and individuals, shape the translation and publication of Arabic literary works and explores their impact on the representation of Arab culture in the West. The paper gives examples of several translated Arabic works, reading through the external factors that have influenced their selection, translation, and reception in their target culture. The study contends that the translation of Arabic literature is often driven by ideological and financial motivations, resulting in a restrictive representation of Arab culture that perpetuates stereotypes and exoticism. Furthermore, the paper argues that the "decontextualization" of translated texts leads to a loss of their original identity and purpose, as they are re-inserted within their new context and reinterpreted according to the socio-cultural background of the target audience. By shedding light on the complex dynamics governing literary translation from Arabic, this study highlights the need for understanding the external factors that shape the translation and representation of Arabic literature in the West.

1. INTRODUCTION

The field of literary translation refers to the transfer of a literary text written in a particular language into another language and culture. It is, in fact, the outcome of a number of translational operations conducted by the agents involved in the act of literary translation, namely translators, editors, and publishers. These people act in an environment that is shaped by the dynamics of literary translation in a specific time and space to rewrite an original work and insert it into a network of possible relationships, which are to be established within the receiving cultural system (the target culture).

This complex operation involves several stages starting with the selection of an original text for translation to the last stages of editing, proofreading, and publishing. First, a literary translator, a publisher or an editor selects a text for translation according to the interests, orientation, and policy of the publishing house. When the first draft is submitted by the translator, the editing process begins. This stage is usually carried out by a second qualified translator with the target language as their native language. The editor makes sure the

translation is faithful to the original text with no mistranslations or modifications of meaning introduced to the translation. During this revision stage, slight modifications may take place to make sure the translated version meets the expectations of the target reader. Subsequently, the cover and the layout of the translated book are designed in accordance with the target audience's cultural tastes and preferences. Then comes the final but also critical stage, that of promoting the translated work, whereby reviews and commentaries attempt to give value and visibility to the "new" text, creating some sort of connection with other literary works and previous translations in the target culture. In this context, literary translation entails the reconstruction of a new text and its insertion within "a domestic discursive field that sets the condition for it and also inevitably lifts the translated work from its original context and reconfigures its meaning" (Hassan, 2001, p. 30). The translated text, therefore, "acquires the added dimension of being not only of the culture from which it emerges …it also becomes a novel about the receiving culture or target culture since consciously or unconsciously readers look for an image of themselves reflected in the mirror of a foreign novel" (Hassan, 2001, p. 30).

Literary translation is regarded by many theorists as a process of creating a new text with the translator as a second or a new author not only in relation to the modifications, additions or omissions that the original text might have undergone during the process of translation but also in the sense that the translated text acquires a new reality, as it is read and interpreted in the light of a network of relationships that it forms (or was meant to form) with other (foreign) literary works. In this context, translations are considered a complex process of cultural exchange which, Bassnett & Trivedi (1992, p.2) remind us, do not happen in a vacuum but in a continuum. Translation is not a discrete act, but rather a continuous process of cultural exchange that occurs within a broader context (Bassnett & Trivedi (1992, p.2). It is "not an innocent, transparent activity, but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems." (Bassnett & Trivedi: 1999:2)

This is what invokes all sorts of questions related to fidelity, manipulation, and identity, particularly when talking about translations from non-Western and Arab countries towards American and European ones, the so-called hegemonic or superior cultures. These questions are related to the forces and the dynamics that regulate the selection of certain literary works or authors over others for translation. One of the main questions is why are some works or authors selected for translation while other writers are completely overlooked despite their contributions and the merits that they have achieved locally. This raises important issues related

to the recognition and marginalization of foreign literature, the representation of the source culture in the translated text, and how these works are perceived, read and interpreted in their new "home". Translations also play a crucial role in enhancing or subverting the prevailing stereotypes of the 'East' and Arabs. Constraints that regulate literary production in a global context are also significant in Arabic literary translation. These constraints impact the translation of Arabic literature, shaping its reception and interpretation in the West.

2. TRANSLATION, PATRONAGE AND POWER

In translation, the selection and reception of literary texts constitute a complex process that can be influenced by multiple factors of historical, political, ideological, economic and cultural nature. In *Translation, Rewriting and Manipulation of Literary Fame*, Lefevere (1992) summarises these factors in his concept of "Patronage". Drawing on the system theory from Russian Formalism, Lefevere (1992) regards translations as a sub-system of the system of literature, which is also one of the broad subsystems that society consists of. According to Lefevere (1992), the literary system is controlled by a double factor: one from within and the other from without the system itself. The first factor refers to the professionals, the writers, translators, teachers and critics who control the literary system from the inside. The second control factor which operates from outside is what Lefevere calls "Patronage", and it refers to the patrons, persons or groups of persons and the Media (Lefevere, 1992, p. 14). The first category, the professionals, operate within the parameters set by the patrons and abide by them. The latter is interested more in the ideology of literature than in its poetics.

Lefevere (1992) breaks down patronage into three main categories: ideological, economic and status. Ideological patronage refers to the support and sponsorship of translations that align with the patron's ideological beliefs, values, or agenda. This type of patronage is driven by a desire to promote a particular worldview, ideology, or cultural perspective. It exerts power on both form and content. Economic patronage relates to the payment of writers and rewriters in the form of royalty payments and translator's fees (Munday, 2008, p. 127). The last component is related to the status of the translator and that can refer to the social status that re-writers can acquire for instance by gaining integration into a certain social group or a particular lifestyle (Lefevere 1992: 16).

Lefevere (1992) sheds strong light on the important role of the ideological component vis-à-vis the other remaining two components (economic and status). In fact, the patron's ideology is considered a decisive factor in the selection and translation of a particular work. In other words, a translator's adherence to or agreement with the patron's ideology or the

dominant ideology of the time is a controlling factor of the translator's remuneration (economic patronage) and status. This primarily explains the reason behind the selection of certain literary works over others for translation. The works selected will usually have some characteristics in common, serving a certain agenda or ideology or enhancing or subverting a particular image of the source text/culture, for instance. In addition to politics, these translations will also, quite often, adhere to certain poetics. In the same line, the taste and the expectations of the target reader play a critical role in the selection and translation of some works over others.

Patronage, in this context, is definitely a form of power that is not to be understood simply as a repressive force (Lefevere, 1992, p. 15). In the Foucauldian definition of the term, power is not just restrictive; it is also productive in the sense that it "induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (Foucault, p.119, as cited in Lefevere,1992, p.15). Patronage here is to be understood as a means of cultural production or reproduction, and as a form of power that disseminates and perpetuates certain forms of knowledge and discourse about cultures. Translation, therefore, is a form of cultural (re) production that is subject to the power dynamics of patronage, which can influence the selection of texts, authors, and cultures to be translated, as well as the translator's choices, thereby shaping the cultural narrative that is produced and disseminated through translation.

Accordingly, literary translation wields power in manipulating the meaning of the original text to fit within the context of reception. As scholars of the manipulation school argue, translations do not happen in a vacuum; rather they happen to serve a specific purpose or purposes, which are always conditioned by a certain force or power (patronage). The constraints that shape up the objectives of translation or the choice of a particular text (s), author or culture can emanate from the socio-cultural or the political context of reception in the target culture. In line with the same idea, translations can emerge to serve, by either introducing or enhancing, a particular *ideology* or agenda, one that conforms or serves in a way or another the current beliefs and values in the society where the translated text is going to be transposed. As a result, translation is regarded a form of "rewriting" initiated to adapt an original text to meet a certain ideology or to conform to a certain poetics or both" (Hermans, 2004, p.127). Lefevere (1982) also explains the manipulative power of translation through his concept of "refraction". What Lefevere (1982) means by translation as refraction is "the adaptation of a work of literature to a different audience, to influence how that audience reads the work" (Lefevere,1982, p. 235). He points out that texts (translations included) are always understood by refractions, that is through "misunderstandings" and "misconceptions". In this regard, he also explains that: Writers and their work are always understood and conceived against a

certain background or, if you will, are refracted through a certain spectrum, just as their work itself can refract previous works through a certain spectrum." (Lefevere,1982, p. 235)

In colonial and postcolonial contexts, translation wields power in transferring knowledge and constructing or enhancing previously constructed images or stereotypes about the "other". In his essay "The Exotic Space of Cultural Translation", Carbonell (1996) argues that translation as a transfer of knowledge from one given culture to another is "relocated and interpreted according to the conditions in which knowledge is produced" (Carbonell,199, p. 80). Translations in such contexts are "inscribed within the politics, the strategies of power, and the mythology of stereotyping and representation of other cultures" (Alvarez & Vidal, 1996, p. 80). Translation is also approached as "power" when it serves the construction "of colonial subjects" (Simon, 2000, p. 11-12) or imaginary fictitious images and inaccurate representations of the "Other", what Said (1979) labels "imaginary geographies".

Literary translations constitute an interesting site for representations or misrepresentations, stereotyping, manipulation and construction of identities, "a network in which a culture is fashioned" (Carbonell,1996, p. 81). Postcolonial contexts, argues Simon (2000), "heighten awareness that translations are solicited and exchanged according to rules of trade and ownership, which are both commercial and ideological" (p.13). In fact, translation implies "that we understand all exchange within the context of global power relations. We see cultural traffic, the movement of books, plays, ideas, and languages, as involved by the dynamics of exchange dictated by colonialism and its consequences (Simon, 2000, p. 17).

3. EXTERNAL FACTORS SHAPING LITERARY TRANSLATION FROM ARABIC

"Nothing has meaning in isolation. The problem is always what kind of context ...who chooses it? And why was it chosen?" (Alvarez &Vidal, 1996, p. 3)

The politics of translation refers to the factors governing the selection, translation, circulation and interpretation of certain texts. It acknowledges that this process (of selecting an author or a text for translation) is not a neutral or objective one. It is rather a subjective and highly charged activity motivated by cultural, social, and ideological perceptions and objectives that shape up our understanding of other cultures. In the context of Arabic literary translation into English, and despite the notable surge in the volume of translations originating from Arabic, the translation landscape still exhibits a striking disparity, wherein the flow of translations from the Arab world to other languages lags significantly behind the translation traffic from and into European languages. This phenomenon is particularly noteworthy, as it underscores the persisting imbalance in the global translation dynamics, where the Arab

world's rich cultural and literary heritage is not being adequately represented in the global literary canon. In addition, many significant Arabic literary works remain largely unknown in the West, with a considerable number still awaiting translation, thereby limiting their global accessibility and appreciation, and ultimately, their potential to enrich the literary canon.

Roger Allen (2009), speaking about "the Arabic best seller", selects three novels, namely, Rajaa Alsanea's *Banat al-Riyad*, Ahlam Mustaghanimi's *Dhakirat al-jasad*, and Ala' al-Aswani, '*Imarat Ya'qubiyan*' that have "met decidedly mixed evaluative receptions from their local critical communities, and yet, in spite of that, have sold unusually large numbers of copies. Beyond that, their translated versions have also sold extremely well in Western markets" (2010, p.10). In a conversation with M'barek S'rifi (2020), Roger Allen highlights the problematic Western reception of Arabic literature, wherein authors like Rajaa al-Sanea, Alaa Al-Aswany, and Ahlam Mustaghanimi receive acclaim in the West not for their literary innovation or artistic value, but rather for the restrictive nature of their (mis) representation of Arab societies, focusing on themes such as politics, corruption, and sexuality. Except for Ahlam Mustaghanmi, Allen argues in his interview with Srifi (2020) that these authors perpetuate a highly negative portrayal of Arab society, reinforcing and perpetuating pre-constructed stereotypes about it. In this regard, he maintains:

> I was not impressed by the novel '*I-ma-rat Ya'qubiyan*'. I wrote an article on this topic… which examined the works of Alaa Al-Aswany, Ahlam Mustaghanimi, and Rajaa Al-Sanea. I argued that these novels received moderate acclaim in academic and critical circles, yet simultaneously enjoyed an overwhelming and disproportionate reception among the majority of readers. This poses a significant problem for us in the West. (Srifi, 2020, my translation).

Novels like '*Imarat Ya'qubiyan*', Allen carries on, "are not contemporary; rather, they are tackling modern themes in an outdated way, a style reminiscent of Naguib Mahfouz's works from fifty years ago" (Srifi, 2020, my translation). In contrast, Allen notes that Arab writers like Elias Khoury, Ibrahim Nasrallah, Ibrahim al-Kuni, Radwa Ashour, Sahar Khalifeh, and others, who demonstrate greater literary maturity and originality, remain relatively underread and quite overlooked (Srifi, 2020, my translation).

Roger Allen clearly attributes the success of these works and their English translations to the themes tackled by their authors as well as by their representation of Arab society, one that matches the "expectations" of a large audience in the West. Indeed, the social, cultural and political background or knowledge (be it complete or fragmented) about the source culture defines the taste of the target reader and their expectations about a text/ a translation. This

interest, of course, constitutes a main criterion considered in the process of the selection of texts to be translated. In the same context, Allen explains how "foreign publishing houses have representatives in some Arab capitals, monitoring the reception of these novels. Sometimes, some publishing houses ask us to translate these novels, even if they are not worthy of translation, but they receive a wide reception from readers in America, England, and France." (Srifi, 2020, my translation).

The reason behind encouraging the translation of such works can be ideological, financial or both. An example is the increasing number of translations from the Arab world after the 11th of September 2001, which unravels the West's interest in further understanding its counterpart. The question here is which texts were selected for translation and what kind of representation do they offer? Sherif Ismail (2015) writes that:

> Since the events of 11 September 2001, there has been greater interest in translating Arabic literature into English in order to enhance understanding of the Arab–Muslim world. However, much focus has been placed on writers whose works substantiate Western preconceptions of Arab Others, and hence are of interest to English readers and can as such be marketed and promoted. By focusing on such works, the process of translating and creating a canon of Arabic literature into English can result not in better understanding but in consolidating identitarian and reductive stereotypes of Arab Others (Ismail, 2015, p. 1)

The problem, as Said Faiq (2004) puts it, is the growing number of Arab writers who are writing according to "the norms of master discourses of European languages" in order to be translated and/ or achieve recognition in the West. Faiq (2004) blames this situation on the fact that many translated Arabic writings were originally written for the purpose of being translated. Such texts, Faiq argues, have to conform to dominant Western representations of Arab culture and society and to dominant Western ideological, moral and aesthetic values. They were either written in Arabic with the aim of being translated or written in European languages. Faiq (2004) gives the example of two Arab writers famous in the West, Nawal Al-Saadaoui (Egyptian) and Tahar Benjelloun (Moroccan). According to him, El-Saadaoui's fame in the West "does not stem from her status as a writer who criticises social practices, particularly women issues in the Arab World, but primarily from her accounts of 'clitoridectomy': accounts in demand in the West. This has led El-Saadawi "to tailor her writings in response to the pressures and appeal of the Western marketplace" (Faiq, 2004, p 9). In order to achieve international recognition, following Tahar ben Jelloun's novel (originally

written in French) "La Nuit Sacre", winner of the prestigious Prix Goncourt (1987), Arab authors must abide by the following rules: "(a) conform to the dominant Western representations of Arab culture society and (b): dominant Western ideological moral and aesthetic values (Faiq, 2004, p.10). Faiq (2004) argues that these texts are "well received by the West because they are full of nights with an image of the dead and ghosts; precisely what mainstream orientalist discourse maintains in its depiction of Arabs and Islam" (2004, p. 11). He maintains that as far as translation from Arabic is concerned there is:

> A continuous interaction between Western representations of Arabic culture and the linguistic, cultural and political economy of translation from Arabic. Even the writings in French or English of Arabs tend to fit two criteria: the dominant ideology and poetics of translation from Arabic and the dominant stereotypical representations of Arab-Islamic culture. These two criteria have been framed by the numerous translations of Thousand and One Nights, which, for almost two centuries, has undeniably been the main source of Western representations of Arab culture and by extension Islam, as a cultural ensemble, in both the extremely negative (violence, barbarism, etc.) and the positive, but inherently negative (exoticism and sensualism) (Faiq, 2004, p. 11).

The issue of misrepresentation of Arab culture can be attributed to two facts; the first one is the focus on works that highlight and, therefore, perpetuate the same redundant images of the East through themes of exoticism, sensualism, violence, and so on. The second fact is the decontextualization that texts undergo once translated into a foreign language. When a text is translated, it is inserted within a new literary world of the receiving culture. In this respect, we can say that texts travel without their original context as they become "new originals" inserted within a new literary context, and, therefore, they are read and interpreted according to the perception and the socio-cultural background of their new audience. In other words, these texts become "decontextualized" as they are removed from their original context and interpreted in line with other works and contexts. In line with this idea, Wail Hassan (2001) writes that translation is:

> Both are carried out and received within a domestic discursive field that sets the condition for it and also inevitably lifts the translated work from its original context and reconfigures its meaning. Over and beyond the impossibility of total fidelity at the linguistic level, the work acquires the added dimension of being not only of the culture from which it emerges (say a novel from Egypt) but, ultimately, about that

culture in its totality (a novel about Egypt, tout cours, rather than a particular event, idea, historical period, or whatever else it may be for Egyptian readers). … It also becomes a novel about the receiving culture or target culture since consciously or unconsciously readers look for an image of themselves reflected in the mirror of a foreign novel" (Hassan, 2001, p. 30).

This speaks the power that translation entails in reconfiguring the meaning of the source text as it migrates from its original context to its hosting one. A text might partially or fully lose its identity and its original purpose when it is inserted, read and interpreted in the light of new social, cultural and/or political framework. This process can involve a great deal of manipulation that is sometimes considered necessary to make the text more "readable", acceptable, and appealing to the taste and interest of its new readers. Another important point that Hassan (2001) highlights in the same respect is that of the target reader (the reader of the translation) looking for the image of themselves in the mirror of a foreign novel. This is another criterion that guarantees either the success or failure of the translated text and its circulation. In other words, if the target reader cannot establish a connection of some sort with the foreign text, they wouldn't be interested in reading it and, therefore, the text would probably not be considered for translation in the first place. In line with the same thought, Naser Albreeky (2022) describes translation as "the practice of finding common ground between a foreign text and an already existing familiar framework in the minds of the translator's audience… This also suggests that in cases where a familiar framework does not exist in the target language and culture, the text in question risks literary confinement to the language in which it was originally produced" (Albreeky, 2022, p. 1). An example of this literary analogue is Roger Allen's translation of the Moroccan Poet and writer Hassan Najmi's novel *Gertrude* (2013). Najmi's biographical novel revolves around the life of the well-known iconic American modernist poet and writer Gertrude Stein. Najmi's narrative sheds light on an old man from Tangier named Mohammed mentioned in Stein's *Autobiography Alice B. Toklas* (1934*)* (a literary bestseller). In Najmi's novel, Mohammed is Gertrude's guide during her visit to Tangier. While Stein mentions Mohammed in *the Autobiography Alice B. Toklas* (1934), she did not state that she remained in contact with him following her trip to Tangier. In Najmi's novel, Mohammed follows her back to Paris and becomes part of her circle, participating in her famous salon and getting sexually intimate with her.

Another example are the translations of the American self-exiled Novelist Paul Bowles of a group of illiterate young Moroccan men from Tangier, namely Mohammed Mrabet, Larbi

Layachi, Ahmed Yacoubi, Abdesslam Boulaich and Mohammed Choukri. Their oral stories which Bowles transcribed and translated into English invoked themes of sexual encounters with the natives and kif (cannabis) smoking in the international zone of Tangier, issues that were very welcome in America post WWII (Mourad 2016). These stories had as a foreign analogue Paul Bowles's writings about North Africa (*The Sheltering Sky* (1949)) as well as the Beat literature, which marked a major shift in American literature during the sixties. In this context, Mourad (2016) argues that "the Tangerian oral stories were encouraged, read and interpreted in the context of the social "resistance" that the counterculture was promoting in the US rather than resistance at home, postcolonial Morocco' (Mourad, 2016, p.166). Mourad (2016) concludes that these "Moroccan" stories which were narrated for the sake of translation "were read and interpreted in line with the reality of the "Other", that is resistance in the context of the American counterculture instead of resistance at home/ post-colonial Morocco.

4. CONCLUSION

Literary translation is a complex process that has been regarded by many theorists as a form of rewriting "initiated with the intention of adapting an original text to meet a certain ideology or to conform to a certain poetics or to both" (Hermans, 2004, p.127). This process of reconstruction, as aptly described by Baker (2014), involves the creation of a new text, where the translator assumes the role of a second author, not only in terms of the modifications, additions, or omissions made to the original text but also in the sense that the translated text acquires a new reality, as it is read and interpreted via the various relationships that it forms (or its was meant to form) with the other works written in the receiving language or the ones that have been translated from other foreign languages. This network of (new) relationships that a foreign literary text establishes with other previously written or translated works is what guarantees its second life in its new receiving context. It is also what conditions its potential (mis)interpretation in line with its new context. In the same vein, Lefevere (1982) describes translation as "refraction", where literary works are adapted for a different audience, with the intention of influencing how that audience engages with the work (1982, p. 235). Translations, like all re-writings, are, therefore, always understood by refractions, that is through "misunderstandings" and "misconceptions".

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