

## Translation and Anxiety about Self-Image and Identity in the Arab World

Nedal Mousa Al-Mousa\*  
Arab Open University, Jordan

**Abstract:** Arab intellectuals and practitioners of translation in the age of globalization are exerting strenuous efforts to initiate an organized large-scale translation activity from Arabic into foreign languages and vice versa, activity inspired by the sweeping force of cross-cultural interaction and communication in the age of globalization. In addition to its traditional role as a means of promoting cross culture communication and transmitting knowledge and information, translation, particularly from Arabic into foreign languages at the present time in the Arab World is conceived as an effective medium to project a genuine or authentic image of Arabs culture. That is in an attempt to rectify growing misrepresentations of Arab culture and their image especially in the West in the aftermath of the tragic event of the eleventh of September. It is often maintained that translation of the Arab culture production into English has always tended to confirm pre-existing Western prejudice based mainly on orientalist assumptions about the orient in general and the Arab World in particular. Another important claim is that foreign (mainly western translators) from Arabic into English usually produce manipulated target language texts which reflect ideological moral or aesthetic values privileged in the West, thus acting in violation of the moral values and indigenous thoughts presented in the source language text. The most flagrant examples of such manipulations can be found in translations of Arabic literary works dealing with feminist themes. The paper examines specific examples of the two claims that translation is used as means of manipulations leading to representation of distorted images of the Arab culture and identity. The paper also discusses views on how to control translation activity in the Arab World to serve Arab aspirations for better representation in Western discourse liberated from ethnocentricity, pre-existing prejudices, and from what Andre Lefevere describes as the "dictates" of the "patrons" of translation

One of the striking aspects of the new American social-science attention to the Orient is its singular avoidance of literature. You can read through reams of expert writing on the modern Near East and never encounter a single reference to literature. What seem to matter far more to the regional expert are "facts" of which a literary text is perhaps a disturber. The net effect of this remarkable omission in modern American awareness of the Arab or Islamic Orient is to keep the region and its people conceptually emasculated, reduced to "attitudes" "trends", statistics: in short, dehumanized. Since an Arab poet or novelist- and there are many- writes of his humanity (however strange that may be), he effectively disrupts the various patterns (images, clichés, abstractions) by which the Orient is represented. A literary text speaks more or less directly of a living reality (Said 1978:291).

Edward Said's views on the function of literature as a means of presenting a humanized image of the Orient to replace its established stereotyped image in American culture coincide with Salma Jayyusi's notions that PROTA's (The Project of Translation from Arabic Literature) primary concern about translating Arabic literature into foreign languages to modify stereotyped attitudes of

foreigners towards Arabic culture and societies. Obviously, this reflects deep anxiety about self-image and identity in the Arab world. In the Preface to *The Literature of Modern Arabia and Anthology* published by PROTA, Jayyusi writes:

This anthology will complete everyone's picture of the area and deepen their understanding of its people, as well as of the spirit that directs the way they look at, and interact with, the world. I believe that the best way people on the outside can truly and fully discover Arabia's hidden conscience, its motivating impulse, its generosity, its pride, idealism and supreme dignity, is through reading its literature. It is then, through such an acquired familiarity with experiences, the sentiments, the ideals and visions of Arabia's authors, that rigid stereotypes will be fractured and replaced with valid realities (Jayyusi/1988:19-20).

The presentation of valid realities of Arab culture and society in the anthology of translated Arabic literary works is achieved by PROTA in its capacity, in the terminology of André Lefevere as a "patron" committed to translating selected works of art reflecting a genuine, realistic image of the state of affairs in the Arab World. In his book *Translating Literature: Practice and Theory in a Comparative Literature Context*, André Lefevere writes:

These, then, are categories for translation analysis that goes beyond individual texts: First authority-not only the authority of the patron, the person or institution commissioning or publishing the translation, but also the authority of a culture viewed as the central culture in a given time or a geographical area (Lefevere 1992:115).

To achieve its national cultural mission of eliminating stereotyped images of Arab culture in the West, PROTA, according to Jayyusi, applies strict measures in selecting literary works for translation and commissioning carefully chosen translators well-known for their integrity and objectivity. But what happens when the second type of "authority", in the sense defined by Lefevere, takes over in the field of translating Arabic literary works into foreign languages? Dalya Cohen-Mor's translation of a collection of Arabic short stories into English furnishes a good example of how the change of "authority" in translation activity produces a totally different effect determined by the requirements and imperatives of the culture which shapes the authority and sets its goals. In the "Acknowledgements" at the beginning of her work, Cohen-Mor writes:

This work has evolved over the period of time in which I taught Arabic literature at the State University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. The contact with students, and the general observation that women's life in Arab society is often stereotyped and poorly understood provided the first impetus to study and collect stories by and about women from different parts of the Arab world (Cohen-Mor 1993:ix).

These remarks seem to suggest that the motive behind Cohen-Mor's translation of Arabic short stories was to change stereotyped images of Arab women, but the opposite seems to be true. The very title of Cohen-Mor's translation: *An Arabian Mosaic: Short Stories by Arab Women Writers* provides us with a clue as for the authority of the culture at work in her translation. The

word Arabian, I would argue, suggests the translator's tendency to translate short stories reflecting negative Arab women's conditions which tend to conform to preconceived, unfavorable extra-textual attitudes in Western thought about the Arab World, attitudes derived in no small degree from the world of the Arabian Nights.

By evoking the exotic, oriental world of the Arabian Nights, Coehn-Mor employs what Lawrence Venuti would call a "foreignizing translation" which alienates the source culture to the English-speaking reader. This translation strategy is designed to put the intended reader in a frame of mind whereby he can easily accept a reshuffling or recycling of old attitudes and stereotypes of Arab culture in a modern context-the ultimate goal of Cohen-Mor.

Cohen-Mor's translation practice stands in sharp contrast with Roger Allen's experience in translating Arabic literary works into English. In response to a question as for the factors which lead to his choice of an Arabic literary work for translation into English, Roger Allen points out:

In most cases, the matter is one of the translator's personal choice, often based on an acquaintance with the author in question. In my personal case, a significant factor is the intrinsically local features that I find in the text; in other words, the fact that it does not reflect the presupposed exotic Western notions of an "Arabian Nights" Middle East (qtd. in Wettig :8).

While Roger Allen tends to choose works for translation which do not reflect preconceived Arabian Nights-based Western notions about the Arab world, Cohen-Mor is keen to do the opposite.

Her tendency to confirm stereotyped images of miserable conditions of Arab women in Western culture is conspicuously reflected in her translation of particularly three Arabic short stories by Nawal al-Saadawi, Latifa al-Zayat, and Lyla al-Uthman. The three short stories have the identical title of "Picture", but al-Saadawi's short story deals with dramatizing the misfortunes of a little girl; whereas al-Zayat's short story portrays the miserable conditions of a young wife, and the third short story by al-Uthman highlights the suffering of a middle-aged woman. The point is that in her choice of these three short stories, representing, as it were, a full cycle of a woman's life in the Arab world, a cycle at every stage of which woman is doomed to suffer, Cohen-Mor aims at drawing all-embracing and overwhelming image of woman's suffering in the Arab world.

To highlight the theme of suffering and to heighten the reader's awareness of it, Cohen-Mor had this to say about the three short stories:

"Suffering is the sole origin of consciousness" wrote Dostoyevsky: in Nawal al-Saadawi's story the budding little girl comes upon her much-admired father raping the maid in the kitchen; in Latifa al-Zayat's story the vulnerable young wife is publicly confronted with her husband's infidelity; and in Layla al-Uthman's story the insecure middle-aged woman looking for reassurance in an extramarital love affair stumbles upon an image of her own confused self in another woman (Cohen-Mor 1993: xix).

The depiction of women's suffering in the three short stories could not have been more forcefully emphasized than by pointing out its profound Dostoyevskian quality. This, I would argue, provides further evidence that Cohen-Mor's translation project is carried out with a view to strengthening her reader's stereotypes rather than breaking them mainly by invoking the world of the Arabian Nights. Thus, Cohen-Mor can be rightly dubbed as the "translator Orientalist" (Cortes 1995:63) who consciously depicts a biased image of the Orient which is expected from her work as a translator conditioned by the Occident's Arabian Nights-inspired image of the Orient.

Ovidio Carbonell Cortes' opening remarks of his article entitled "Orientalism in Translation Familiarizing and Defamiliarizing Strategies" may illustrate the point I am trying to make:

So-called "primitive", "exotic" or oriental texts provide some of the most illustrative examples of the cultural bias that usually takes place in translation. It is already well known that the conditions of knowledge production, and therefore also the conditions of the translation process, are deeply inscribed with the politics, the strategies of power, and the mythology of stereotyping and representation of other cultures (Ibid. 1995:63).

It has often been maintained that translating is not a neutral activity.

Injustice and oppression inflicted on women in the Arab world figure as pivotal issues in the fictional writings of Nawal al-Saadawi. This, according to commentators, accounts for the remarkable attention given to her literary works by foreign translators and publishers. All of al-Saadawi's fictional writings (7 novels) in addition to her autobiography which concentrate on the presentation of desolate conditions of Arab women are viewed in the West as al-Saadawi's anti-Islamic version of feminism. A view which, as Elizabeth W. Fernea has pointed out, conforms to traditional association of Islam with women's oppression in Western culture. Elizabeth W. Fernea also adds that in contrast with the remarkable attention given to al-Saadawi's presumably representative Islamic feminism, writings by conservative Arab Muslim female writers have hardly received any attention by Western translators and publishers (Fernea 2005:6).

Al-Saadawi's success in the West generates a great deal of criticism in the Arab World. Her critics argue that the international recognition she has achieved is based not so much on her advocacy of women's rights, but on account of presenting negative images of Arab women's conditions which confirm the existing stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims. It is often maintained that this assessment of al-Saadawi is adopted by her male critics who are hostile to her radical feminist views. But his kind of criticism is levelled against al-Saadawi by well known Arab women writers.

In an article entitled "My Experience with Translation" Sahar Khalifah, making frequent references to al-Saadawi, observes:

Why do foreign publishing houses devote such interest in, and concentrate so much on, our women's literature? Is it to serve our women's cause out of sheer love for us, or is it because our women's writings sell well in lucrative market? Our women's literature arouses western interest either because it is informative on

the feminine gender generally, or it makes the western reader gloat over what is seen as documents bearing witness to our blatant misconduct in this field: *The Field of Woman* (Khalifah 2005:12).

Alia Mamdouh, in her turn, calls into question the West's celebration of the writings of al-Saadawi. She argues that "Nawal al-Saadawi does not present the true picture of the creativity of Arab women." Alia Mamdouh goes on to say that al-Saadawi "turns creativity which is imagination and living memory into a lab to show sick samples which are deformed and which she represents as generalized social types(qtd. in Amieh:4).

In the general context of using or misusing of translation as a means of distorting and misrepresenting Arab image and identity in western culture, similar misgivings to those of Sahar Khalifah and Alia Mamdouh are expressed by other Arab authors such Gamal Ghitany and Ibrahim Nasrallah. Such misgivings come within the framework of what Lawrence Venuti would describe as cultural resistance to translation whenever cultural misrepresentation or distortion associated with translation obtains: "Cultures," Lefevere observes: "may resist translation because it is felt to threaten their self-image (Lefevere 1992:128).

The argument that Nawal al-Saadawi and other Arab feminists such as Fatima Merniss and Hanan al-Shaykh have been appropriated by the West to suit Western purposes has also been advanced in connection with the Saudi novelist Turki al-Hamad whose controversial Trilogy has been translated into English. Al-Hamad's critics argue that his Trilogy has received enormous attention on the part of foreign translators and publishers on account of its dramatization of the gap between the ideal self-image Saudi Arabia wants to claim for itself and the actual world of reality, rather than on the basis of its artistic merits and innovative technique. Yet, enthusiasm for translating al-Hamad's Trilogy has been tremendously aroused as a result of the four fatwas (religious rulings) and death threats issued against him by Muslim clerics. Interestingly, the so-called fatwas and death threats issued against al-Hamad are deliberately plastered over the covers of the three translated novels: Adama, Shumaisi, and Karadib, that is as part of, it would seem, a smearing campaign against Saudi Arabia.

Issuing death threats against authors and banning their works from being published, one is tempted to suggest, are the new criterion by which one can judge how good an Arabic book is for Western readers. The remarks made by Peter Ripken that Arabic books usually arouse Western publishers' and translators' interest as a result of having been banned by Arab authorities are particularly applicable to Turki al-Hamad (Whitaker 2004). Interest in Al-Hamad's explosive controversial Trilogy in the West is such that it earns him the coveted attention of Time magazine. The Time magazine devotes its Books Page of its edition of January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005 to a general review of al-Hamad's Trilogy, highlighting the supposed fatwas and threats which figure as part of the headnote for the review titled: "Triumphant Trilogy: Fatwas and death threats won't stop Saudi novelist Turki al-Hamad from writing or his fans from buying." While it underlines the controversial position of the Trilogy on account of its content which seems to tally

well with Western reader's assumptions of what creative Arabic writing should be about, the review passes over its artistic shortcomings in full silence. That is in sharp contrast with Kaelen Wilson Goldie's critical review of the Trilogy in the Daily Star in which he observes:

For all the controversy, they, the novels [Adama, Shumaisi, and Karadib] are flat and lackluster .... Hamad's writing, on the other hand, is remarkably almost, unforgivably-limp and lifeless. On page after page of prose, he violates the age-old dictum of "show, don't tell," offering full passages of explanation. No gesture is left unanalyzed (Goldie 2005:2).

Nevertheless, Turki al-Hamad competes with Nawal al-Saadawi in gaining English speaking readers' interest and attraction. Statistics reveal that of all Arab authors it is only Nawal al-Saadawi and Turki al-Hamad who have managed sales of more than 10,000 copies in translation.

In an interesting review of Adama, Mary Whipple observes:

Al-Hamad's novel humanizes young men like Hisham [the young hero of the Trilogy] for the western reader, showing his aspirations to many of the same goals as the rest of us. His love for his family, his desire to honour his parents and his discomfort with lying are typical of good sons everywhere.... Those of us reading this book in English will celebrate anew the freedom of our press, while perhaps gaining a bit of new insight into the conflict between ideas and reality in other parts of the world (Whipple:2).

The humanizing effect of the translation of al-Hamad's novel referred to in the first part of this quotation reminds us strongly of the views of Edward Said and Salma Jayyusi in the first part of this paper that reading literature may contribute to a better human understanding cross-culturally. But the last part of the quotation points in the direction of a totally different issue in the world of translation; namely, ethnocentrism as is reflected in Goldie's taking pride in the "freedom" of "press" in the West in comparison with the restrictive measures of publication in the Arab world. Ethnocentrism inspires also Goldie's final critical remark on the disparity between ideas and reality in the Arab world, which is, he seems to suggest, alien to Western culture.

Venuti's following insightful comments may shed light on this point:

Translating can never simply be communication between equals because it is fundamentally ethnocentric. Most literary projects are initiated in the domestic culture, where a foreign text is selected to satisfy different tastes from those that motivated its composition and reception in the native culture (Venuti 1988:11).

The impact of ethnocentrism in the field of translating Arabic works into English is reflected in a more obvious manner in R. Bayly Winder's translation of Tawfik a-Hakim's novel *Bird of the East*. According to Winder, there are three versions of this novel two of them are in Arabic and the third one is in French. The first edition of the Arabic version was published in (1937), and the second edition was revised and published in (1964), whereas the French version was published in (1960). The French version includes eight additions some of which

appear in the second edition of the Arabic version. Winder based his English translation on a French translation of the novel which includes a particularly significant addition which does not appear in the two Arabic versions of the novel. Winder, I would argue, pieces together a text which suited his individual purpose; he even acts both as editor and as interpreter, thus he produces an English version of the original text designed for a given reader in a given language, and in the context of a given target culture. To make further comments on Winder's enterprise intelligible, let us quote the already mentioned addition in toti:

In any case there would have been no point in discussing the question in depth. Muhsin didn't fully agree with his desperately sick friend anyway. In spite of everything, Muhsin viewed the West not as something to reject but some thing to incorporate. "Stripped of its arrogance," he thought to himself, "and of its sense of superior self-sufficiency, Western civilization could be the base out of which will emerge Universal Civilization. This Civilization of Man, whose location on the surface of the globe will be immaterial, will contain all that is beautiful, useful, and viable in the West and in the East. After all, East and West are really only two sides of a single coin that in itself is whole. If these two civilizations could once be united into such a total civilization, man would see the dawn of true peace. But to reach that goal, the new civilization cannot neglect or slight a single thing. It must envelop and include every thing: it must learn and develop every thing. And it must do it all in a spirit of modesty, of charity and of love." It was with this hope that the young Egyptian looked to the West and to its future, which simultaneously represented for him the future of the whole of humanity (Al- Hakim 1966:168-69).

I believe that it is not far fetched to argue that Tawfik al-Hakim has deliberately omitted this paragraph from the two Arabic versions in order not to offend his Arabic readers who may not find it acceptable to admit the superiority of the West to the East as the quotation seems to suggest. Whereas the translator chooses to base his translation on the French edition which serves his own ethnocentric purposes. In his justification for including the already quoted paragraph in his English translation, Winder maintains:

Addition number (8) does not appear in Arabic II. True it may be that its point of view can be gathered elsewhere in the book from Muhsin's attitudes, but it is not without interest to note that Tawfik al-Hakim preferred to permit his Arabic reader to draw this important conclusion unaided whereas he presented it explicitly to the outsider reader (Ibid. 1966: xiv)

But it is perhaps more to the point to argue, as it has been already hinted at, that the translator's choice of the French version as the basis of his translation fits in with his purpose to satisfy the taste and ideology of his western readers who may derive a great deal of satisfaction from presenting the West as a source of inspiration for the emergence of a universal civilization; that is in correspondence with their ethnocentric orientation.

In light of the foregoing discussion of the examples and cases of culturally-determined translation projects, strategies, and personal manipulations, one is inclined to subscribe to Salma Jayyusi's argument that translation of Arabic literature into English should be assigned to objective translators who are willing

to put aside their personal prejudices and purposes. It is hoped that this undertaking would enable the Arabs to make use of their translated literature as a means to find their own voice and to project their true image. These notions are very well encapsulated in two lines of verse by a Kuwaiti poet quoted by Jayyusi in the "Introduction" to the previously mentioned anthology of translated Arabic literary works: "When will we strive, my friend to be not as others imagine us but as we wish ourselves to be" (qtd. in Jayyusi 1988:23).

\*Nedal Mousa Al-Mousa, Professor

B.O Box: 961165

Fax: 5630610

Sport City Amman

Email: n\_almosa@aou.edu.jo

## References

- Al-Hakim, Taufik.** (1966). *Bird of the East*. (translated by R. Bayly Winder)  
Beirut: Khayats.
- Amireh, Amal.** "Publishing in the West: Problems and Prospects for Arab Women Writers". <http://usembassy-amman.org.jo>.
- Cohen-Mor, Dalya.** (1993). *An Arabian Mosaic: Short Stories by Arab Women Writers*. U.S.A: Sheba Press.
- Cortés, Ovidio Carbonell.** (1995). 'Orientalism in Translation Familiarizing and Defamiliarizing Strategies'. In Ann Beylerd – Ozeroff, Jent Králová, and Barbara Moser – Mercer (eds.), *Translators Strategies and Creativity: Selected Papers from the 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Translation and Interpreting. Prague, September 1995*. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Fernea, Elizabeth W.** (2005). 'The Changing Context in the Translated Feminine Arabic Novel'. In Tayki 22.
- Goldie, Kaelen Wilson.**(2005). 'Turki al-Hamad's not-so Explosive Trilogy', 13 January. <http://www.dailystar.com/b/article.asp?>
- Jayyusi, Salma K. (ed.).** (1988). *The Literature of Modern Arabia an Anthology*. London and New York: Kegan Paul International.
- Khalifah, Sahar.** (2005). 'My Experience with Translation'. In Tayki, 22, 10-14.
- Lefevere, André.** (1992). *Translating Literature: Practice and Theory in\_a Comparative Literature Context*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Said, Edward W.** (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Venuti, Lawrence.** (1988). *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*. New York: Routledge.
- Wettig, Hannah.** 'Is Arab Literature Being Lost in Translation?', In American Resource Center. <http://usembassy-amman.org.jo>.

**Whitaker, Brian.** (2004). Middle East dispatch: Language Barrier, 23  
September. <http://www.guardian.co.uk>.

**Wipple, Mary.** (2003). 'Adama by Turki al-Hamad,'  
<http://www.desijournal.com/book.asp>? Article 88, 1-3.