

# The Role of English in a Cosmopolitan Arab Novel through Literary Texts Translation

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## Abstract

In the aim of achieving greater visibility, too many Arab literary texts have been translated into English. Actually, this work gives focus on the post-colonial era in which too many literary works were produced but the western orientalist and academics continued to consider them as worthless and worked to spread stereotypes until a wave of translations in the Arab literature took place. This paper shows how the orientalist notion that modern Arab literature is not a literature by itself but a social documentary, proved to be untrue through the remarkable translated texts which achieved repute and success inside as well as outside the Arab boundaries.

**Keywords:** Cosmopolitan, orientalist, post-colonial, literary text translation, September 11, Arab Spring,

## Introduction

When we intend to discuss the role of English in Arab novel, we should refer to the general political situation in the twentieth century when most of the Arab countries were under the European colonizing empires who are the British, French and Italian. Though most of the Arab countries got their independence in the second half of the twentieth century, the postcolonial culture continued even after evacuating the colonial powers. Actually, the colonized countries couldn't get rid easily of the colonial empires inheritance because they ruled the region for a long period of time in which the period could exceed one century. During their stay, they tirelessly tried to change the regional culture and impose their own culture by either using reward or punishment.

In the second half of the twentieth century, too many literary works were produced which talked about some issues of identity, freedom, religion and politics. In the case of the Arab novel, too many good novels were written but they were only circulated in their local areas of the Arab world. Ibid said that there are two reasons which prevented the Arab wirings in general and Arab novel in particular from dissemination is that because "many Arabs know European languages well, but very few Europeans are able to read Arabic". This indicates the shortage in Arabic literature translation. The second reason which Rooke points out is "the prejudice of the European audience" (ibid: 46 as quoted in Taai,2). Even after colonizers' evacuation, the western writers continued to keep their orientalist notion regarding the produced literary genres in the Arab world and this had kept the Arab novel invisible to the other parts of this world. It

remained so until Nagib Mahfuz won noble prize in literature (1988). After that, too many translations from Arabic to English shed lights on the Arab novel to be internationally more visible.

Unfortunately, negative attitudes of the western elite writers towards the previous colonized areas were efficient in widening the cultural gap between the Arab world and the West. Their writings were effortlessly serving the selfish political desires of their countries which long for the past social, political, economic and cultural dominance over these countries. They looked down upon the Arab literature in general and the Arab novel in particular as worthless to be paid more attention. Arab literature was circumvented by translational bias and the stereotypes against Arabs and Muslims in general.

No doubt, the political prejudice against the Arab countries immensely participated to the cultural prejudice between the Arab culture and European culture. Conspicuously, the translation from Arabic into English started after Mahfouz won the noble prize for literature in (1988). It was an inspiration to a wave of translations from Arabic into English and motivated a lot of the western writers to shift their attention to the Arab novel and discover its deep aesthetics. Thirty five novels of Mahfouz were translated into English; six novels of Taha Hussein were also translated to English, also six novels and two plays of Tawfiq Al-Hakim were translated and too many other works. Though Mahfouz was not the only excellent Arab novelist but he is considered the father of the modern Arab novel (Alkharashi, 4).

Another wave of translation which made the Arab novel more visible is the events of September, 2001. These events urged too much interest in reading and translating about the Arab novel though this interest was largely cultural than it was literary because the western readership got curious to know more about the Islamic culture as well as the literary culture to be able to understand what happened in America. This event made the western people read about the Arab novel as much as they can. The most prominent translated works from Arabic into English were by Alaa Al Aswany's *Yacubian Building* (2004), *The Girls of Riyadh* (2007), Mohammed Abdulwali's *They Die Strangers* (2008), *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Saleh, *Women of Sand and Myrrh* (1992), *Beirut Blues* (1992), *The Stone of Laughter* (1990) by author Hoda Barakat. These are only some examples of a huge number of novels which were translated after Mahfuz's Nobel Prize in (1988).

Furthermore, the political turmoil after September 11 and political uprising that crossed many Arab countries motivated another two waves of translations from Arabic to English. These two events suddenly happened, so a lot of social, political and literary attitudes have changed. Composing and narrating novels have got increased among the Arab writers and the numbers of translations into English have increased as well. Through the medium of English, a new window opened to a cosmopolitan novel instead of limited regional novel. Thus, the Arab novel has shared many features with the western culture and both of them are two parts of the global culture. Translating Arabic novels into English can be realized as a better challenge to the false stereotypes and claims about Arabs and their literature. Later, it has been proved that the Arabic literature includes a wide space for the human concern and humanity.

## Post-colonial Studies in the Arab Novel

At the beginning of such studies, the main concern was focused on writers from English-speaking countries like Britain, Canada and USA without involving writers from the Arab countries. Even after the second half of the twentieth century, the western criticism and interest were directed towards the Egyptian novelists particularly Nagib Mahfuz who attracted the whole attention of the western critics. Writers from other countries like Altayp Saleh from Sudan, Mohammed Abdulwali from Yemen , Ghassan Kanafani and Jabir Ebrahaim from Palestine were neglected. These novelists are some of the Arab novelists who discussed some important topics like identity, nationalism, hybridity, resistance and conflict between modernity and traditions. They included ideas from Edward Said in their writings. However, in the last two decades, there is more interest shifted towards such writers and more than hundred novels have been translated into English (Alwadhaf, 5).

The Arab novel texts faced difficulties in the western markets and they can be summerized into three points:

- 1- The western point of view about the arabic literature as “problematic” and this point represents Said’s view that the Arabic language and literature are considered by the weserners as irrespectable.
- 2- Lack of criteria to determine which texts to be translated or not.
- 3- The quality of translated texts which need dual experience in both languages as well as flexibility and unbias. This is strongly related to the social cultural and historical background of the whole Arab area (Nash, 2).

However, whatever were the difficulies, the Arab novel scored higher levels of translations and reached a wide range of western readership. Some of the Arabic novels might not have received attention in the Arab countries because they have dealt with controversial issues but they achieved success in the west like Nagib Mahfouz’s *Children of our Alley* (1988). However, there is nowadays an interest inside the American universities in Arabic literature since the number of enrolled students has increased; this will change the old oriental vision about the Arab world and its people. Nash said the fiction taught in undergraduate levels in America represents only a neo-oriental vision which should be changed.

From a post-colonial view, many Arab writers still consider the Arabic literature as sieged by the western literature which is regarded as a barrier. However, do they still have this view as same as the older times when Edward Said wrote his views on orientalism? The answer is “no”, because nobody can’t stop Arabic literature circulation if its writers want to spread their literature outside the Arab area. If they translate more litreary texts in English as being a global language, the possibilities of diffusion and interaction with other global cultures are almost to take place. The translated Arabic novels have become popular among the western readersips and broken isolation like Tayp Salih’ *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) and Abdurahman Munif’s *Cities of Salt* (1987).

During the recent two decades, the Arab novel has become more visible and available in the western market. Nevertheless, the majority of the translated novels have received less criticism; they are either ignored or marginalized by the western critics. Through criticism, more lights will be shed on and they will attract attention due to the discovered implicit aesthetics. The main issue about the post-colonial writings of the Arabic novel is lying in the complexity of various cultural issues it dealt with. Identity, resistance, freedom, conflict between traditions and modernity are some of the most common issues of the Arabic novel. The emergence of the contemporary Arabic novel was accompanied with the political situation when the western colonizers were settling the Arab world. The complexity of themes and confusion about the political attitude during the era of colonization influenced the general attitudes of too many western scholars and critics against the Arabic fiction.

It is undisputed that the colonization is not only a control power but it controlled the culture as well, so after the collapse of colonization in the Arab areas, Arabs started the formation of their independent identity which resists subservience to the western power and this created a cultural clash with the western culture which lasted for a longer period of time (Dizayi, 2). Healing process after colonization had taken time which caused delay in interacting with the Arabic novel; this means that the western writers and critics served the political aims of their countries whereas the Arab novelists adhered strongly to the themes of resistance and freedom which caused a cultural gap between the two cultures and postponed the spread of Arabic novel in the west till last recent decades. This particularly was as a kind of repression to any call for freedom and independence from the colonial powers in Arab literature.

### **Translations After Events of September in USA and Arab Spring**

September 11, (2001) and the Arab Spring (2010) were two political events which influenced not only the general political situation but also the cultural situation in USA, Arab countries and other parts of this world. Though they were political events, the cultural influence was present. After these two events, people from different cultures became curious to know more about these two sudden events and the curiosity here is cultural more than literary but later developed to be literary. As a result of a sudden growth of interest, too many translations in the Arabic novel have taken place especially into English language which has been the gate through which the Arabic novel gained more global prominence.

After 9/11, Americans realised that there is something wrong about the relationship between Americans and the Arab world. They raised a lot of questions regarding this relationship and why do too many Arabs as well as muslims hate us? They decided to read and translate more about the Arabic literature because it reflects the whole culture. However, the general image of Arabs and muslims after September 11, was linked with terrorism, violence and muslim fundamentalism. Nash said that “adopting the perspective of an American reader Steven Salaita suggests the “category of ‘Arab’ [...] brings to mind a set of images [...] some of them contradictory: brutish, misogynistic, untrustworthy, sexually voracious, greedy” (Nash, 4). Despite all of that, the phenomenon of translation effectively began.

Al-aswany's *Chicago* (2007) was translated by Farouk Abdulwhab Mustafa (2008). This novel revolves about the obstacles facing the Egyptians who are pursuing their post-graduate studies at the university of illinois, at Chicago. Its events take place in Egypt and USA. In *Chicago*, the protagonist, Shima Almahmoudy studies medicine. She is too much suffocated by her patriarchal society and can't enjoy the freedom she is having in the USA because of her old patriarchal culture and discrimination she faces in her university in the USA especially after 9/11 events. She is horribly discriminated by one of her professors due to her cultural background as an Arab and muslim. On the other side, one of her professors firmly stands besides her and denies all the discriminatory deeds practised against Shima and other Arab muslim emigrants. This novel disdains discrimination and the stereotypical image about Arabs and muslims as being terrorist.

However, the translated Arabic novels are not only restricted to the sufferings inside the United States of America. Arab novelists write about various topics like their identity, Arab-Israeli conflict and social, political issues concerning their homelands. When their works are translated into English, then they become more exposed to a global reading. Sahar Kalifa's *The Image, the Icon and the Covenant* was written in (2002) and translated by Aida Bamia in (2007). It depicts the constant bloody conflicts between the Palestinians and Israelis and how the hostile feelings are still available and growing. Identity and nationalism themes are strictly raised in this novel. Kalfia argued the Palestinians' rights to get rid of the Israeli colonization and get freedom even if they left their lands since a long time and settled in new places in this world. In addition, it endorses more progressive awareness and interest into the women's rights as well as their struggle against the social discrimination (Mahmoud, 3).

After 9/11, Alaa Al-Aswany wrote his famous novel (*Yacoubian Bilding* or *Imaart Yacoubian*) in (2002) and translated into English in (2004) by Humphery T. Davis. It has dealt with the universal challenges the Egyptian women are facing to due to the modern changes in this world and and relating them to concepts of globalism, capitalism and discrimination. Also, it refers to the social, political and economic corruptions which leave people in constant pain and suffering. Rajja AlSanea's *Banat Alriyad (Girls of Al-riyadh)* was written in (2005) and translated into English in (2007). It is very controversial novel in the Saudi society since it deals with the relationships between males and females which are considered as social taboos. This translated novel is one of the best-sellers in the west though it is firmly banned inside the conservative Saudi society.

Though banned from circulation in Saudi Arabia like too many Arab novels, Rajja AlSanea's *Banat Alriyad (Girls of Al-riyadh)* got visible through English translation. There is a growing interest in the Arab literature which to a great extent helped the Arab novelists in publishing their novels outside their boundaries. Similarly, Nagib Mahfouz's *Children of our Alley* (1959) was published in Lebanon in (1967), translated into English in (1981). It was't allowed to be published in Egypt because it was considered as a blasphemous novel since it degrades religion. In 1984, Abdulrahman Munif published his controversial

novel, *Cities of Salt*, (1987) which includes political views that irritated the rulers of Saudi Arabia. Of course, this novel got popular outside the Saudi Arabia before it is welcomed inside (Al-Dabbagh, 5).

The event of 9/11 and its aftermath re-directed the attention to the Arabic fiction and immensely urged an interest in translating too many Arabic novels into English. The British Council and the British centre for Literary Translations aimed to bring the Arabic novel closer to the British novel (Abdel Wahab, 12). They funded translations from Arabic into English and too many workshops have been held in Cairo for the sake of improving the ways of translations. Similarly, in USA, many states funded too many initiatives to translate from Arabic into English in the hope of bridging the gap between the Arab world and America. This interest in translation served the Arabic literature in general and Arabic novel in particular.

It can be noticed that the factors influencing on the Arabic novel translations are external forces which are related to political situation and power more than the internal forces which are represented by the translators and publishers. Field of power was shocked in September 11,2001 and at the same time it shocked the field of culture. Translations are not only restricted to what is related to politics and power but they have turned to society and culture to see the reasons and secrets lying behind the sudden changes in power. However, this shock was neither perfectly positive nor negative. The negative side is that too many stereotypical images of Arabs were aroused; on the other hand, the positive side is that the “ethnocentric stereotypical orientation gradually began to change” and “Anglophone patrons have played over the years in disseminating Arabic fiction to English-speaking readers” (Al-Dabbagh, 1).

Translations of the Arabic fiction into English is adopted by a number of translators, publishing houses, magazines and journals. Sometimes, patrons of the publishing houses get involved in selecting specific Arabic texts to be translated into English. Their intervention could be for achieving a commercial promotion but this depends upon the cultural interest of the western reader. Genuinely, increase in numbers of the publishing houses in the west has initiated for a constant flow of the Arabic fiction to the English-speaking audience. Once Nagib Mahfouz awarded with Nobel Prizes, a lot of Anglophone publishers accompanied with a lot of translators competed in translating his other novels which are around thirty five novels. The curious English readers about the Arab culture whether they are already prejudiced or not have the ability to steer what kind of Arab fiction should have the priority to be translated. That is because “there is a hostility in the reader’s mind to characters who don’t fit particular stereotypes” (Al-Dabbagh, 2).

In Arab Spring, like 9/11 events, there is a relationship between politics and literature. There are too many translated Arabic fictions into English which not only represent the Arab Spring uprising in 2010, but they also react, intervene into the Arab Spring narratives. Such novels can be classified as political novels. The external power of politics has been strongly present in the Arab Spring fiction and this emphasizes the link between the art and socio-political world though in the West there is an emphasis on the autonomy of art from politics. Those who support the relevance between politics and art see the relationship between

them according to either the content which represents political subjects or the formal commitment which focuses on the language or forms through which the narrative is presented (Geurts, 100).

Many Arabic novels were written during the Arab Spring time and was translated into English like Fadi Azzam's *Sarmada*, (originally written in Arabic), January 2011, English translation: October 2011. Other novels were written before the Arab Spring but they subjected to a wave of translations like "Khaled Khalifa's *In Praise of Hatred* (originally written in Arabic), 2006, English translation: 2012" and Ahmed Khaled Towfik's *Utopia* (originally written in Arabic), 2008, English translation: December 2011. Fadi Azzam's *Sarmada* was written at the beginning of the Arab Spring and it depicts "a world different from the bloody events in Syria: it takes the reader on an odyssey in a society that is mostly away from strife and unrest, one in which different religious groups, including Muslims, Christians, and Druze, live peacefully side by side" (Bahhari, 45).

Fadi Azzam's *Sarmada* (2012) uses the magical realism to describe a mythical village where there isn't any political chaos or social tension. It equally moves between reality and fatasy by narrating myths, folktales and exotic perceptions. It aims to criticize the fundamentalism, reactionaries as well as the government. Furthermore, it has neglected the sectarian conflict in Syria though it is immensely existent. Though it has presented a stereotypical image of the Syrian women, *Sarmada* has focused on the cultural life of the Syrian population in the village of Sarmada where harmony among the people of different religious background exists. The narrator has made reference to the religious harmony in Lebanon and the possibility of applying it in their village, Sarmada. The writer's view is that fundamentalism and dictatorship are very devastating power and the Arab Spring generally aimed to extradicate them.

Khaled Khalifa's *In Praise of Hatred* was translated in (2008) but it was banned from publish in Syria due to political reasons, so it was published for the first time in Lebanon. It alluded to the massacres committed in Hama against the political opponents during the rule of Hafez Alasad in 1970s. Ibrhaim Alkoni's the *Puppet* (2010) was translated by William Hutchin and it deals with with the greedy and political corruption. Shimon, Samuel, *An Iraqi in Paris* (2010) which depicts good man who leads a corrupt society. Mahfouz, Naguib's *The Final Hour* (2010) sheds light on the transformative developments that Egypt achieved during the twentieth century. Selmi, Habib's *The Scents of MarieClaire* (2010) was translated into English by Fadwa Al Qasem. It shows the cultural conflict between the east and west through a plot represented by a couple in which the husband is an Arab whereas his wife is a western woman. Their cultural system represents their cultural bacgrounds (Guthrie,144).

Such novels moved from the space of individual language and culture to other languages and cultures , so they will serve as a catalyst for mutual communication cross the regional boundaries. They are as cultural ambassdors who effortlessly strengthen the relations between different cultures. They become like a global commodity which is exported or imported from one culture to another. In the case of the Arabic novel, it has been imported by Anglophone translators, publishing houses, newspapers.....etc in order

to start a new era of interest and fame in the west. Translated Arabic novels bears the sense of the Arab culture with its various social, historical and political changes.

Therefore, translations of the Arabic fiction into English shouldn't be only understood as mere translations but they should be interpreted as the backdrop of the socio-historical and political conditions under which they are produced or read. The translations of fiction are not only translations but they are conditioned by the external forces like power and politics which are considered as external forces to the translations of the fiction (Abdel Wahab, 14). There will be considerable difference in the ways in which the Arabic novels are translated into English for reaching the international readership. Most of the Arabic novels are prepared for the Arab readership but there are a lot of the good Arabic novels which have a global, human concern, so they become able to reach easily to the international readers once they are translated into English or any other language.

### Female Arab Novelists

Unfortunately, western readership have based their views regarding the Arab women with the stereotypes that have been circulated for a long time in history by relating these stereotypes to Islam and the Arab world. The Arab women are portrayed as victims of the gender oppression and domestic violence. These biased views have been reflected negatively on the Arab novelists and result in neglect for a long period of time. However, such images have been resisted and modified after too many novels have been translated into English. In the last two decades, too many Arab female novelists have established a remarkable status in the western market. The quick technological developments and waves of translations have benefited the Arab female writers to cross their regional boundary.

We have already mentioned some of them like Rajaa Alsanea's novel *Banat al-Riyadh*, Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* (1993) which was translated into twenty-one languages and more than one million copies were sold. Diana Abu-Jaber's second novel *Crescent* (2004), Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2007), Hanan al-Shaykh's *Only in London* (2001), *I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops* (2002), *The Locust and the Bird: My Mother's Story* (Trans. 2009). These are some of the most prominent Arab novelists who discussed different social, cultural and political issues concerning their countries of origin. Some of them come to live outside of their home culture, so they have written about their identity issues and difficulties of life outside their homeland. Whatever their themes are, Arab female novelists have densely participated in bridging the cultural differences between the east and west.

Alkharashi said that the rise of the social and academic feminist movement provoked an interest to the Arab female novelists like Fadua Tuqan, Nawal Saadawi. Their translations were often translated by female translators. Arab female novelists' participation have been a striking shift in raising the interest in reading and translations of the Arab fiction. They have become the voice for all those females who are suffering in their culture from patriarchal culture, domestic violence, oppression and discrimination. Arab



women novelists' writings have been received in the west but mixed with the cultural and political environment of the host language (Nash, 4).

## conclusion

The emergence of the contemporary novel in its modern form began with the beginning of the twentieth century. During this era, most of the Arab countries were under the European colonizers; however, they were liberated and then got freedom after the second half of the twentieth century. Circulation of the Arabic novel remained restricted to the Arab traditional boundary until Nagib Mahfouz won the Nobel Prize in (1988), so after that, a wave of translations to many Arabic novels started. The translated novels served as a catalyst for mutual communication cross the regional boundary. This period was followed by two political events which are September 11, 2001 and Arab Spring in 2010 which urged massive translations to the Arabic novel. Though the motivation for such translations was at first cultural but later changed to be literary and aesthetic.

During these three waves of translations, the Arabic novel has become more visible outside of the Arab world and attracted the attention to the Arabic novel not only to English-speaking countries or Anglophone areas but such translations were an inspiration for translating the Arabic novel into different languages other than English. Therefore, translations of the Arabic fiction into English shouldn't be only understood as mere translations but they should be interpreted as the backdrop of the socio-historical and political conditions under which they were produced or read. It is considered helpful and beneficial to read, interpret and understand the Arab fiction and its translations according to the surrounding, external forces of power and politics which accompanied the writing and developments of Arabic fiction.

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