

Modern Arabic Literature: Challenges for Translation

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Abstract:

In recent years, Arabic literature has made tangible progress into acceptance as part of world literature, due largely to translation. This border-crossing process is not, however, without limitations. This paper explores the challenges faced by modern Arabic literature in its translation journey, from the selection process, and factors that govern it, to strategies that manipulate the texts and paratexts in the translation phase. The paper focuses on the English translation of two contemporary female Arab writers' books (fiction and non-fiction) and sheds light upon the practices and manipulations governing the translation process. To this aim, content and semi-otic analyses have been used.

Keywords: Arabic Literature, Challenges, Framing, (Para)text Manipulation, Translation

Introduction

Arabic literature reflects the richness and diversity of the Arabic language(s) and culture(s). And this variety has been made available to a larger audience and a wider readership through translation. Hence building bridges between Arabic and the cultures of the world and contributing to the respect of difference. However, difference is, oftentimes, omitted or accentuated in translation, making the letter a biased vehicle for the circulation of stereotypical representations and images of the Arabs in general and the

Arab women in particular. Moreover, there are factors, other than literary, that govern translation from its earliest stage, selection.

This paper is twofold. It first aims to highlight the impediments revolving around the process of translating modern Arabic literature into English, namely challenges dealing with the selection process. It also seeks, using content and semiotic analysis, to scrutinise some translation strategies that “re-package” the original works through the comparative study of two contemporary Arabic works (fiction and non-fiction) that have been translated to English, among other languages. In other words, this paper is about the What and the How of the translation process. It investigates the kind of Arabic works that are translated into English and the way they are translated to suit their new audiences.

The Noble Prize, a literary milestone

1988 was a turning point in Arabic literature. Najib Mahfoud was the first Arabic writer to win the Nobel Prize, mainly for a trilogy he published in 1957, the “Cairo Trilogy”, which included three books *Between the Palaces*, *Palace of Longing*, and *Sugarhouse*. According to the Nobel Prize committee, Mahfoud, “through works rich in nuance – now clear-sightedly realistic, now evocatively ambiguous – has formed an Arabian narrative art that applies to all mankind.”¹ This prestigious award opened the world’s doors to Mahfoud’s works and Arabic literature as a whole. Mahfoud, and the Arab writers in general, received rising interest in having their works translated into English. Mahfoud’s declaration following the award shows that Arabic literature used to be enjoyed locally and that the prize will lead to its translation to different languages making it known and appreciated globally:

The Nobel Prize has given me, for the first time in my life, the feeling that my literature could be appreciated on an international level. The Arab world also won the Nobel with me. I believe that international doors have opened, and that from now on, literate people will consider Arab literature also. We deserve that recognition.²

¹ The Nobel Prize in Literature 1988. (n.d.). Retrieved 25 January 2023, from Nobel-prize.org website: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1988/summary/>

² Larry Luxner. (March–April 1989). "A Nobel for the Arab Nation". *Aramco World*. Houston: Aramco Services Company. <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/198902/a.nobel.for.the.arab.nation.htm>.

Mahfoud frequently equated politics with literature in his works, upsetting political figures. He had criticized the military takeover that put Jamal Abdel Nasser in power in Egypt in 1952 in some of his novels¹ and highlighted the drawbacks of dictatorship at a time when no one dared to speak out against Nasser's regime. And this links politics to the Noble Prize of literature, other literary prizes, and then translation.

9/11 and the Arab Spring, political milestones

In his article "Arabic Literature in Translation: Politics and Poetics", Tarek Shamma sheds the light on political and literary connections:

[A] look at the list of winners in International Prize of Arabic Fiction, perhaps the most eminent literary prize in Arabic today, confirms that a combination of «grand causes» (political struggles, controversial, but not very controversial, religious questions) and some form of intercultural experience seem to be decisive factors, above and beyond purely literary merits.²

Indeed, political events constitute an important criterion in the selection process of Arabic works to be translated into English; a criterion sometimes more important than literary merit. 9/11 and the Arab Spring clearly illustrate this. These political developments refocused attention on translation and confirmed that “something as nano-scaled as a translation error can precipitate catastrophic intelligence failures, and in the worst case scenario another 9/11 (an anxiety repeatedly voiced at the annual conference of the American Translators Association in 2003).³ Indeed, The 9/11 attacks have impacted the way the world views Arabs, Muslims, and the Arabic language. The West, specifically the U.S., showed a growing interest in knowing about Arabs and their language after these attacks. Jay Nordlinger starts his article “Thanks for the Memri⁴(.Org)” as follows:

¹ *The Thief and the Dogs* (1961), *Chatting on the Nile* (1966) and *Miramar* (1967)

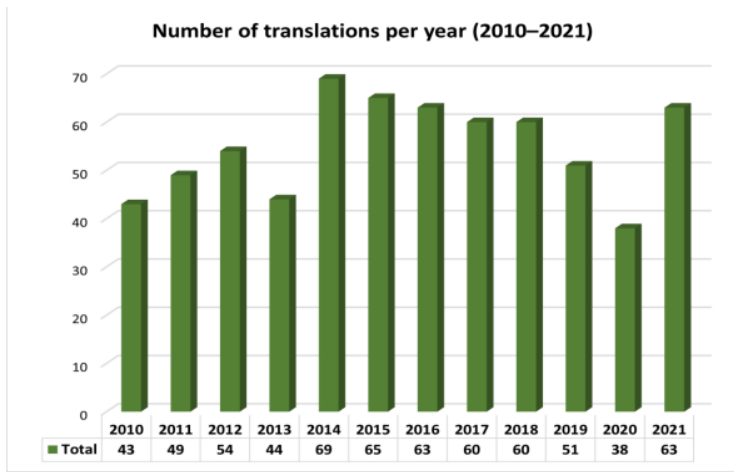
² Tarek Shamma, (June 2016). "Arabic Literature in Translation: Politics and Poetics", *Clina*, vol 2-1, p 8.

³ Emily Apter. (2007). "Translation-9/11: Terrorism, Immigration, and the World of Global Language Politics", *The Global South*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Globalization and the Future of Comparative Literature, pp. 69-80 Published by: Indiana University Press Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40339273> , p.70.

⁴ Memri stands for Middle East Media Research Institute.

After The 9/11 attacks, the West realized that it knew little about the Arab world – in fact, dangerously little. Why do they hate us so, and did this come out of the blue.' It seemed imperative to learn more about the Arabs – to learn, for example, what they were saying to one another, in their media, in their schools, and in their mosques. The Arab world had always been dark this way; it needed to come into the light.¹

Like 9/11, the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings also led to the proliferation of translated Arabic works. Graph 1 below illustrates the number of published translations from Arabic into English per year, 2010–2021². It shows that there is a noticeable increase in the number of English translations from Arabic literature since 2010. The highest number of published translations is 69 in 2014 and the smallest number is 38 in 2020 (probably due to the pandemic). In the 2011 report (1990–2010), the highest number of translations published per year in the 2011 report was 26.



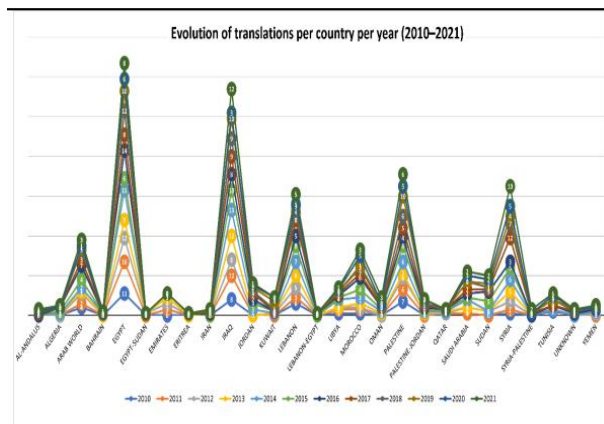
Graph 1: Number of published translations from Arabic into English per year, 2010-2021³

¹ Jay Nordlinger. (2004). “Thanks For The Memri (.Org) An Institute, And Its Website, Bring The Arab World To Light.” National Review.
<https://www.nationalreview.com/2004/09/thanks-memri-org-jay-nordlinger/>.

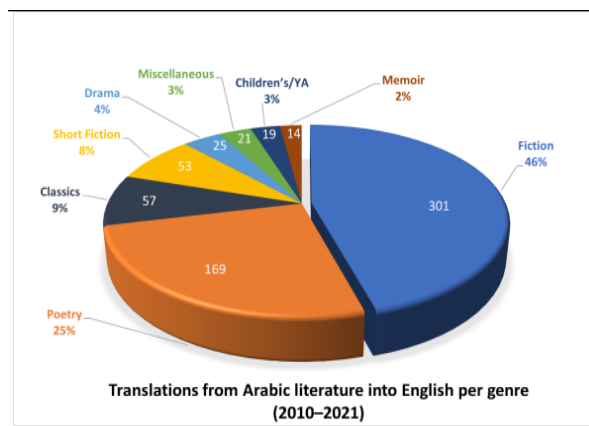
² Alexandra Büchler & Abdel Wahab Khalifa. (2022). Translation of Arabic Literature in the United Kingdom and Ireland, 2010–2020. figshare.
<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.17712299.v4>

³ Ibid. p. 23.

Graph 2 shows that the number of translations of literary works from specific Arab nations (such as Iraq, Syria, and Palestine) saw mini-surges for geopolitical reasons. And graph 3 highlights fiction (novels and novellas) as the most published literary genre for Arabic translations into English, with 301 publications.



Graph 2: Evolution of translations of Arabic literature into English, 2010-2021¹



Graph 3: Translations from Arabic literature into English per genre, 2010-2021²

¹ Ibid, p. 24.

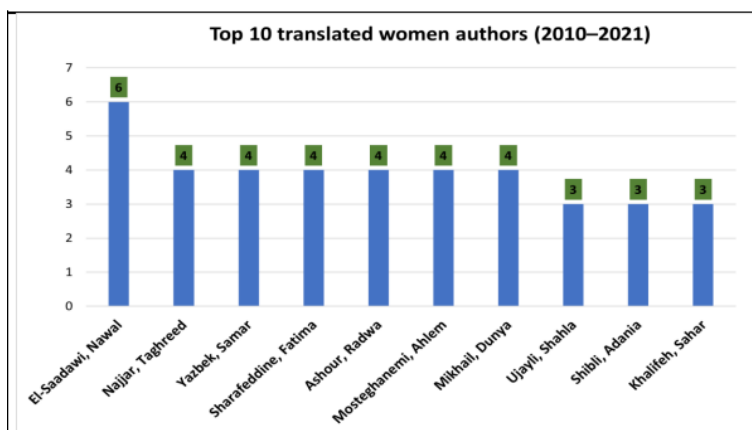
² Ibid. p. 25

Paratextual and textual manipulation

One of the challenges facing the translation of Arabic works into English are the framing devices that shape and influence the readers' reception of the translated books. Paratexts are one of these. Gerard Genette defines the paratexts as the “accompanying productions” that are associated with a text. He distinguishes between two types of paratexts: peritext and epitext. Peritext refers to all types of paratextual elements that appear on or inside the book (book cover, introduction, and preface...). Epitext refers to all types of paratextual elements found outside the book (reviews, interviews, and advertisements...). In fact, paratexts are used for different motivations other than objectively introducing a text to its readers. In what follows, we will demonstrate how paratexts can manipulate translated Arabic works through the analysis of Nawal Assaadawi's book *Alwajh Al'ari li al-Mar'a al-Arabiya* (1977) and Ahlem Mostaghanmi's novel *Dhakirat al-Jasad* ((1993).

Nawal Assaadawi's *Alwajh Al'ari li al-Mar'a al-Arabiya* (1977)

The Egyptian feminist writer Nawal Assaadawi figures as the most translated Arab woman author with six translations over the decade 2010-2021 as shown in graph 4 below. Her book, *Alwajh Al'ari li al-Mar'a al-Arabiya* (الوجه العاري للمرأة العربية) which literally translates into “The Naked Face of the Arab Woman” is one of her most influential books and it is the first of her works to be translated. It was translated to English and published in England in 1980 and in the USA in 1982. But in its journey from Egypt to Europe and then to the USA, the book experienced significant alterations in both form and content. These alterations involved changes in the title and the book cover, a reversal of organization, omissions and additions.



Graph 4: Most translated Arab women authors, 2010–2021¹

- **Title:** The original Arabic title *Alwajh Al'ari li al-Mar'a al-Arabiya* (الوجه العاري للمرأة العربية) implies unveiling and speaking the truth about the lives of Arab women in the hope of changing them. However, the English version goes in the opposite direction and translates the title as: *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. "naked" is changed to "veiled" and "the Arab woman" is changed to "Eve", a movement from reality to fantasy and from history to myth.

- **Cover:** The book covers of the English version show pictures of women's faces hidden either by the veil or by their own hands, whereas the covers of the original Arabic version show unveiled women. (see pictures on page 6)

- **Reversal of organization:** Sections on sexuality that were initially placed in the latter third of the Arabic edition are placed first in the translation. And the historical section on Arab and Muslim women that made up the first half of the original book is moved to the end in the English translation. Hence foregrounding sexuality-related topics.

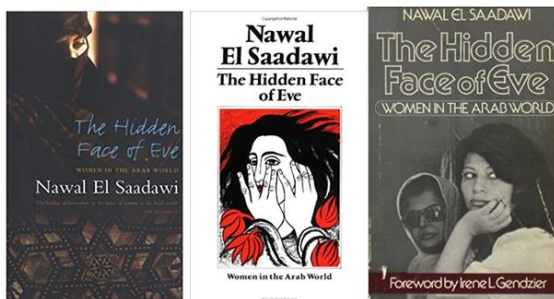
- **Omissions:** The English translation excludes whole chapters like "The Woman's Work at Home" and "The Arab Woman and Socialism," which support socialism over capitalism and condemn it. The English translation also leaves out passages that highlight the advancement of Arab women and

¹ Ibid. p. 27

that claim that they sought sex equality earlier than American and European women.

● **Additions:** In contrast to the original novel, which only briefly mentions circumcision in its opening passages as the author flashes back to her childhood, the translation includes a chapter titled "Circumcision of Girls."

The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World,
Nawal Assaadawi



الوجه العاري للمرأة العربية، نوال السعداوي



Ahlem Mostaghanmi's *Dhakirat al-Jasad* (ذاكرة الجسد) (1993)

Dhakirat al-Jasad, the debut novel of the Algerian novelist Ahlem Mostaghanmi, was translated into English as *Memory in the Flesh* (2000, 2003) and *The Bridges of Constantine* (2013). It has had the singular experience of being translated into English three times over a relatively short period of time. Peter Clark who undertook the second translation and revised both the first and third, states that “[n]ot even Naguib Mahfouz has had three translations of any of his novels... three translations in fifteen years is

remarkable.”¹ Yet, in an interview with Nuha Baaqeel in 2015, Mostaghanmi revealed that she was not satisfied with the translation of Baria Ahmar (American University in Cairo Press, 2000) of her novel saying that: "The American University in Cairo was in a hurry to publish the translation after it [the novel] won Naguib Mahfouz award in 1998."² And similarly to Saadawi's book, Mostaghanmi's novel witnessed changes in the title and cover as well as a major omission of one of its paratexts in its translation journey.

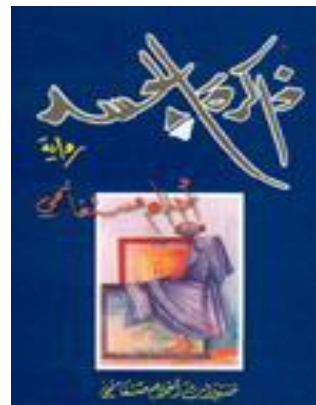
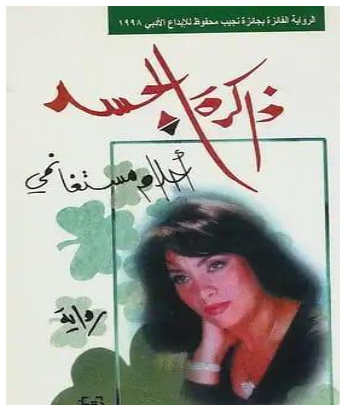
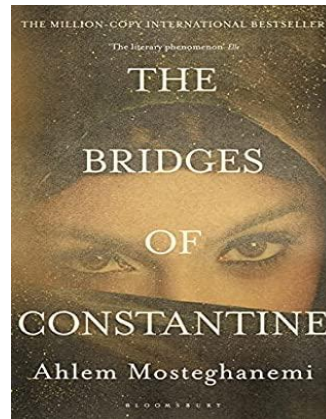
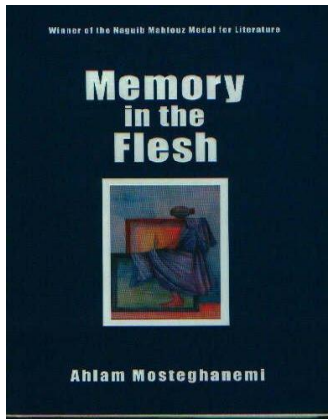
- **Title:** The original title *Dhakhirat al-Jasad* (*Memory in the Flesh*) implies the psychological aspect of the story, whereas the third English edition title *The Bridges of Constantine* highlights the importance and significance of the city of Constantine to the protagonists. And “the bridges” imply the bridges of Paris over which the protagonist's studio looked.

- **Cover:** The first and the second English editions (*Memory in the Flesh*) kept the same cover of the original novel (*Dhakhirat al-Jasad*). The third English edition, however, which appeared under a different title (*The Bridges of Constantine*), is characterized by the addition of a veiled woman on the cover. The woman is invisible except for her attractive kohl-rimmed eyes, which serve as an Orientalist stereotyped reminder of the repressed yet alluring Arab woman. (see pictures on page 7).

- **Omission:** The novel in its original edition includes a dedication to the memory of Malik Haddad who decided to give up writing in French after Algeria got its independence from the French colonization. This dedication is crucial for understanding the whole novel as part of Algerian post-colonial writing. Its deletion in the English translation reframes the novel as romantic outside of the politics of language as it tells a story narrated by a middle-aged Algerian man in love with an Algerian university student in Paris.

¹ Peter Clark, “The Bridges of Constantine by Ahlem Mosteghanemi”, *Banipal 51 Magazine of Modern Arab Literature*, https://www.banipal.co.uk/book_reviews/121/the-bridges-of-constantine/.

² Nuha Baaqeel, (2015). “An Interview with Ahlam Mosteghanemi”, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 26: 1-2, 143-153, DOI: 10.1080/0957404.2015.1035055. p. 146.



Conclusion

In a nutshell, we can say that translation in general, and the translation of Arabic works to English in particular, is not simply about transferring meaning from one language to the other. It involves far more complex practises and processes from the selection to the publication stages. Literary merit does not seem to be the only criterion in the choice of Arabic books to be published. Other criteria, such as political events or gender seem to be prioritised. And the process of translation appears to be governed by the higher discourse within which it operates, a colonialist discourse that manipulates the text and the paratext to “re-package” the translated works so they fit their Western audiences. Moreover, when the original books are authored by female writers, their translated versions celebrate Gayatri Spi-

vak's nostrum of white men saving brown women from brown men, accentuating themes such as oppression and brutality through Orientalist lenses.

There is no better way to conclude this paper than quoting Lynx Qualey, the founding editor of the translation-community website ArabLit: "Don't judge books by their cover – especially Arab works in translation". "As much as food packaging influences the taste of a meal, the packaging of a book changes how we taste literature". "We owe Arab literature in translation a better packaging."¹

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¹ Lynx Qualey. (Jun 28, 2014). "Don't judge books by their cover – especially Arab works in Translation", The National, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts/don-t-judge-books-by-their-cover-especially-arab-works-in-translation-1.656885>

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