

Arab Identity and Literature in Translation: The Politics of Selection and Representation

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Abstract

Literature is an invaluable tool in understanding various aspects of the cultural, social and political processes associated with the Arab drive for modernization. This paper explores representations of Arab identity by examining historical and contemporary Arabic literary works and the processes of translation into European languages they have undergone. It first details the emergence of Arab literature during the Islamic era from late 700 AC to the end of the Abbasid Dynasty, before examining Arabic-language literature, and especially the literature produced by female authors, in more recent times. The nature of Arabic works translated into European languages for Western readers is also discussed with a particular focus on the politics of selection and representation associated with these texts. The paper concludes by discussing both the potential negative impact that translation may have on conceptualizations of Arabs and Arab identities and the potential of translated works to offer deep insight into various aspects of life in the many and diverse countries and territories of the Arab world.

Keywords: Arab literature, identity, selection and representation, translation

Introduction

Arab literature is entrenched in a long, rich heritage dating back to the pre-Islamic era (Al-Mahrooqi & Al-Jahwary, 2011; Ashour, Berrada, Ghazoul, & Richard, 2009). As a people, Arabs are particularly known for the beauty and richness of their language, their eloquence and their love of the spoken word. Arabic's rich vocabulary and its status as a derivational language where different word forms are derived from verbs has enabled many Arabs to possess huge vocabularies that pertain to their often diverse environments and lifestyles. Despite being known for their illiteracy in pre-Islamic times, Muslim Arabs had to develop their memorization skills after the advent of Islam in order to memorize and recite passages from the Quran. In terms of poetry and prose, this was achieved through the use of well-selected words that were often combined in verse to assist memorization. Verses of poems were then passed from one person to another and then, eventually, down through generations. In this way, these verses documented epics, stories, historical events, wars, hardships and human emotions and experiences. Hence, poetry acted as the Arab's oral record of historical events while also portraying their character, their relationships with other peoples, and the environments in which they lived. Hence, the language has long been part of their identity and a true reflection of it.

However, even as the rise of Islam contributed to Arabic's development and dispersion, it was also the rapid spread of Arab influence out from the Arabian Peninsula and into the lands of North and East Africa that brought the Arabs and the West into direct conflict. Examples of this conflict abound in history, though perhaps they are best epitomized by the numerous European crusades to recapture the Holy Land beginning around 1095 and continuing in various guises for centuries, the "Reconquista" of the Iberian Peninsula culminating in the fall of Granada in 1492, and the taking of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453. Despite the sense of hostility that such examples suggest, however, Jabra (1971, p. 76) describes the history of Arab-Western interaction as a "complicated story" featuring a mixture of attraction and repulsion that has existed since Islam's inception.

In fact, the many wars between the Arabs and the West in the Iberian Peninsula, the Byzantine Empire, North Africa and the Holy Land were a great learning experience for both the Arabs and the Europeans who fought them. The eventual success of the Reconquista, for example, contributed to the emergence of Spain and Portugal as the world's dominant sea-faring powers (Mandaville, 2014, p. 57), while the crusaders' time in the Holy Land may be associated with increased demand for the luxury products of the East in medieval Europe and hence the early emergence of consumer economies (Stearns, 2009). However, as Europe's military and economic powers started to expand in the eighteenth century, Western powers began to exert a renewed influence and eventual domination over traditionally Arab-dominated lands as most vividly represented by the Napoleon's invasion and short-lived administration of Egypt beginning in the late eighteenth century (Asante, 2002). This dominance was only enhanced with the event of industrial societies in Europe. In fact, by the time the industrial revolution had fully gathered pace, British, French, and even Italian forces controlled significant parts of the Arab world. This occupation was hastened by the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the carving up of its former territories between the French and British following the First World War (Salibi, 1988).

Jabra (1971) states that, during this European occupation of traditionally Arab-dominated lands mandated by the newly-founded League of Nations:

The Arabs were reviving again into a nation, inspired not only by their own ancient history, but by the modern history of Western nations themselves. The ideals of the French revolution, the liberalism and parliamentary democracy of England, the unification of Italy, of Germany, were all examples to emulate (p. 76).

In this way, Jabra (1971) continues, while Western powers sought to create Arab states under their dominion, the Arabs themselves began seeking to understand more about their own identity, with the “modern” era of the Arab world thus ushered in.

This “search for identity”, especially as it relates to the position of Arabs and Arab nations in the post-2001 world, however, is one that is still present across the Arab world to this day, and one that largely exists in a framework defined by mutual dependence between Arabs and the West and the “clash of civilizations” between them. In fact, contemporary Arab-West relations have been defined by Smith (2011, p. 12) as existing on “one of the great cultural fault-lines of recent human history” (p. 12). The tension inherent in this “fault-line” is fueled by a number of historical and contemporary factors, with issues of economics and hegemony being foremost amongst these. For many, the issue relates to oil. That is, oil is what the Arabs have and what the West has needed, ever since at least the time of Churchill’s early twentieth century decision to fuel the Royal Navy with oil instead of coal (Emmerson, 2013) and especially throughout the period of rapid post-war development, to maintain its dominant economic and military position in the world.

Within this context, the value of literature in understanding the vital cultural, social and political processes associated with the Arab drive for modernization cannot be underestimated. For these reasons, the current paper seeks to explore representations of Arab identity through an examination of both historical and contemporary Arabic literary works and the process of translation. It first offers the emergence of Arab literature during the Islamic era from late 700 AC to the end of the Abbasid Dynasty, before examining Arab literature in modern times and, in particular, Arab women writers. Finally, the nature of Arabic works translated into European languages for Western consumption are also examined with a particular focus on the politics of selection and representation of these texts.

The Rise of Islam and Arabic Literature

Since its revelation, the Quran, reportedly the first book in the Arabic language, has influenced the course of Arabic literature. In particular, it has influenced the style and mode of expression in both speaking and writing among Arab Muslims and Christians alike. The recording of the hadith, or the sayings of Prophet Mohammed, gave raw material for historians to write Mohammed’s biography and even the biographies of some of his companions. For example, Ibn Ishaq’s biography of the Prophet is composed mainly of hadiths arranged in chronological order which tell people about the characteristics and virtues of the messenger. Fiqh and Islamic law were derived from the Quran and the Hadith and, later in the Umayyad era, monographs on specific historical, legal, and religious issues were also composed. All these were influenced by the Hadith style of writing and subsequently contained a chain of transmitters to ascertain the authenticity of what was written (IslamiCity, 2016).

In the late eight century and early ninth century, a number of chronicles were written to depict the spread of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula and beyond. Often assuming a lively tone, these chronicles were often characterized by powerful descriptive passages. As the ninth century progressed, the chain of transmitters that had characterized earlier writing in Arabic was dropped with the rhetorical freedom this gave the author allowing for the composition of prose that formed narrative in such writings as *al-Dinawari* and *al-Ya'cubi* (IslamiCity, 2016).

The collection of poetry – the most ancient and most respected expression of literary art among Arabs – started in Kufa and Basra (in modern-day Iraq) in the eight century. At first, this was done for linguistic, rather than aesthetic, purposes. That is, poetry was viewed as a window to explain some of the concepts and vocabulary mentioned in the Quran. However, it should be noted that the oral composition of poetry by Arabs started much earlier than Islam. The Bedouins were famous for this, and their poetry adhered to strict rules in both content and form. The *qasidah*, or ode, for instance, had to feature a rhyming syllable at the end of each verse. The content of the *qasidah* reflected the nature of desert life and desert dwellers. It starts with:

A description of the abandoned encampment of the poet's beloved and goes on to an account of his anguish at her absence and his consuming love for her. The poet then describes an arduous journey across the desert and ends the *qasidah* with an appeal to the generosity of his host (IslamiCity, 2016, para. 10).

In the first century of Islam, some poets composed poetry on platonic love. Examples of these include Jameel Buthaina and Umar ibn Abi Rabi'ah. In addition, the book of songs, *Kitab al-aghani*, written by Abu al-Faraj al-Asfahani recorded a great deal of this poetry. De Slane's (1843) translation of Ibn Khallikan's thirteenth century *Biographic dictionary* states that Jameel Buthaina's verse for his childhood love, who refused to marry him when he was a man, is so well known that it is not necessary to quote. Excerpts of his work offered include:

You have continued, O Buthaina (to torment me), so that the turtle-dove would sympathize with me, were I, in the ardour of my passion, to awaken its complaints with mine. The jealousy of spies only increased my love, and the prohibitions of my friends only made me persevere (p. 332).

The development of what we now call *adab*, or Arabic literature, came to address the need or demand to educate government officials in the Arabic language, in addition to manners, statecraft, and history. The sources of Arabic literature were, at least at the beginning of its development, translations of the great books of antiquity, such as Abd al-Hamid bin Yahya's translation of the history of the Persian kings, and Ibn al-Muqaffa's translation of *Kalilah wa-Dimnah* – an Indian book of advice for rulers containing animal fables (IslamiCity, 2016).

It is widely acknowledged that Arabic literature witnessed its classical period in the ninth century with great writers possessing encyclopedic knowledge such as al-Jahiz and Ibn Qutaybah who wrote their treatises on animals and knowledge respectively. The tenth century saw the composition of *maqamat* sessions, the most famous of which are those by al-Hamathani and al-Hariri (IslamiCity, 2016). Rhymed poetry continued to influence the Arab writings of even

government and other official documents. Books like *Risalat al-ghufran* (Message of Forgiveness) by al-Ala' al-Ma'ari are famous examples of this. Other notable authors from this era include Al-Mutanabi, a late classical literature poet, who was very well known for his verbal brilliance in handling complex matters in verse.

However, despite this rich heritage, in the opinions of some literary critics, Arabic literature suffered a decline with the political, military and economic setback sustained with the Mongol sacking of Baghdad in 1258 and the “beginning of the fragmentation and the decline of the Muslim empire under Mameluke rule from about 1250 until Ottoman rule, which began in 1517” (El-Sanabary, 1992, p. 5). The response of Arab scholars to the loss of what was then, according to El-Sanabary, the centre of world science and culture, was to focus their attention on preservation rather than creation. However, despite this depiction of the Arab world as more concerned with preserving the glories of the past in the face of the cataclysmic destruction of one of the world's great cities, Allen (2000) notes that this is a period that nonetheless still produced notable works including Ibn Battutah's account of his travels and Ibn Khaldun's *muqadima* (Prolegomena).

Even if this is the case, the occupation, four centuries later, of Istanbul in 1918 and the carving up of previously Ottoman-occupied lands by the European powers was to have important ramifications for Arabic literature. For instance, scholars such as Lewis (1993) state that the exertion of European power in the West encouraged a culture of mimicry in Arabic literature that made many of the literary products created at the time read more like translations from French and English than genuine Arabic texts, even if Jabra (1971) places the tumultuous events of the late 19th and early 20th centuries at the core a renewed Arab consciousness.

Arab Literature in Modern Times

According to Jabra (1971), the nineteenth century witnessed a revival of Arabic literature coinciding with Arab efforts to achieve independence from Ottoman rule. This revival was greatly assisted by the introduction, or at least the widespread use, of the printing press. Some say that the first Arabic printing press with Arabic type was brought into Egypt by Napoleon (Lunde, 1981), while others claim that there had been a printing press in Syria even before that time. In either case, Lunde reminds readers that the first Arabic book printed from moveable type was actually printed in Italy in 1514 – the European country, according to the author, with the broadest interest in the Arab world due to theological and business concerns. It was the 19th century, nonetheless, that witnessed the printing presses of both the Arab world and the West employed to introduce newly-translated European works into traditionally Arab and/or Muslim dominated lands, in addition to the dissemination of Arabic literary works in the region from Arabic's “golden age”.

That such an audience existed for Arabic, Turkish, and Persian translations of European literature was due to several factors, including the expansion of European influence in the region and the attempts of rulers across many parts of the Muslim world to “modernize” their nations in response to Western encroachment (Casewit, 1985; Lewis, 1993). For example, in Egypt, Mohammed Ali Pasha, the viceroy and founder of the early nineteenth century Egyptian Empire which emerged from the power vacuum created from the French withdrawal, introduced a number of projects aimed at modernizing the country and turned to Britain, and then to France,

to contribute to this process (Kirk, 1964). Although he encouraged the use of Arabic in schools, Mohammed Ali, and later his son Ibrahim Pasha, nonetheless supported the expansion of the European missionary schools in the territory under his control that had existed in Egypt and the Levant since as far back as the 1730s (Verde, 2010). The expansion of these schools under the Egyptian Empire was so successful that, by the outbreak of the First World War, Kirk estimates that almost half of all children attending school in Syria and Lebanon received their educations in the French language.

In addition to the encouragement of education in European languages, Mohammed Ali also sent a number of students to France with the purpose of acquiring “modern knowledge” that could be put to use in the modernization of Egypt. On their return, these students were required to translate Western works on law, engineering, agriculture, mathematics, and military tactics into Arabic. These translated texts, along with works from classical literature, were printed in Egyptian presses and distributed across the empire. It was through this act, combined with expanding European influence in the Arab world during the early imperial era, that what Lewis (1993) describes as a culture of mimicry began to emerge with local Arabic rhetorical patterns being greatly altered by their encounters with English and French or even disappearing altogether.

The growing influence of the West on Arabic literature during this period can be seen in the works of such writers as Butrus al-Bustani who expressed the difficulty of conveying Western ideas in Arabic, and the translation of Homer’s *Illiad* by Sulayman al-Bustani into Arabic, thus making a piece of Western thought widely available to Arab readers (Holmberg, 2006). In addition, Mustafa al-Manfaluti’s novelistic style was greatly influenced by more typically French rhetorical patterns which he adapted to suit Arabic tastes, while Jurji Zaydan’s historical novels were popular due to Arab nostalgia for their past and because the literary form of the novel was relatively new to Arab readers at the time (Serageldin, 2012). Taha Hussain is another acclaimed author from later in the imperial period who is noted for his voluminous writings and his autobiography *al-Ayyam* (The Days).

Drama was first introduced in the Arabic world as translations from Western literature, before authors such as Ahmed Shawqi and, later, Tawfiq al-Hakim, developed this form by writing their own plays (IslamiCity, 2016). In terms of poetry, the early nineteenth century witnessed the challenge of the traditional *qasidah* by different modern poets and schools. Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, Ibrahim al-Mazini, and Mahmud Shukri, introduced through their poetry themes commonly associated with the literature of 19th century Europe. In addition to these, Khalil Gibran also became popular with his modernist verse. Journalism in Lebanon and Egypt also played a major role in the revival of Arabic literature. Starting in the mid-1800s and increasing drastically in number by the 1900s, these journals developed and modernized Arabic writing because they emphasized content more than style and consequently simplified prose by abandoning rhyme. In short, from the French retreat from Egypt in 1801 until the fall of Istanbul more than a hundred years later, the content and style of Arabic writing witnessed a number of significant developments and changes.

Many scholars have cited these changes in literary forms, the introduction of more European rhetorical patterns, and the widespread translation of European works into Arabic and

the other dominant Muslim languages of Turkish and Persian as a sign of the death of the Arabic literary tradition (see Alkire, 2007; Verde, 2010), despite Jabra's (1971) insistence that this era witnessed the revival of Arabic literature. Certainly, in the eyes of the West, Arabic literature, once the storehouse of scientific and cultural knowledge and repository of the great books of antiquity (Gutas, 1998), had very little left to offer. Or, as Jacquemond (2004) contends, the prevalent discourse of Orientalism in France and Britain at the time promoted the notion that "Arab culture had produced its best centuries ago, and that it would no longer produce anything worth exploring" (p. 122).

Al-Bagdadi (2008, p. 451) highlights how the rise of national literatures in Arabic, such as Egyptian and Syrian literatures, combined with the imitation of Western literary styles, the nineteenth century translation of European works, and changing understandings of what *adab* is, to result in Arabic losing its primacy as the dominant language of education and culture during the imperial age from the 18th to the 20th centuries. In this way, Al-Bagdadi continues, Arabic literary heritage came to be restricted to the Abbasid period, even if the printing press had somewhat paradoxically made this heritage widely available across Arab lands after the French withdrawal from Egypt. It is due to this link between translation, dissemination, and power that Jacquemond (2004) claims the issues of language and translation have remained central to Arab culture to this day. Nowhere are these concerns more apparent than in debate surrounding the selection of contemporary Arabic works translated into European languages for Western audiences and in the issue of the representation of female Arabic writers in the West.

Arab Women Writers

Ashour et al. (2009) highlight how Arab female writers can draw on a rich and ancient heritage extending as far back as pre-Islamic times. During the Abbasid, Umayyad, and Andalusian eras, the authors claim that records exist of more than 240 female poets, including al-Khansa and Wallada bint al-Mustakfi. Of these, 45 female poets were recorded during the Abbasid period – the golden era of Arabic literature – such as Rabi'a al-Adawiya, who composed Sufi poetry. Female slaves also composed poetry during these periods, with Abu-Faraj al-Asfahani (cited in Ashour et al., 2009) counting 31 slave-poets in his book *Rayy al-zama fi man qal al-shi'r min al-ima* (Thirst-quenching Excerpts from the Lives of Slave Girls). Female slave-poets, according to the authors, served a dual function: "They were to serve, submit, and pleasure, but at the same time, they were peers and rivals in poetry, who might win the upper hand with a unique thought or an eloquent turn of phrase" (p. 10).

Much of the traditional and contemporary appeal of female Arabic writers lay in the different perspectives, tones and sensibilities that they offer from literary works produced by men. These perspectives have been shaped, according to Ashour et al. (2009), by hundreds of years of "silence and oppression in a world long ruled by patriarchy" (p. 10-11), and by the many roles women play in Arab society. The authors sum up this stance in the following words:

Contemporary Arab women writers draw on a rich, complex tradition that encompasses the believer who recites poetry about divine love; the princess who possesses knowledge, power, and standing; the slave girl trained to in the lute and pleasuring her master; the strong free woman capable of public, eloquent speech, at times bold or even obscene; and the shy woman who speaks in a low voice from behind the curtain. The mother of them all is, of course, Sheherazade, the mistress of speech, who tells stories upon stories. Her

tales go beyond time and place, and through them, she takes leave of the king's bed-chamber and steps into the wider world (p. 10).

Despite these differing perspectives and sensibilities, it should be noted that female Arab writers were equally influenced by exposure to Western writing styles and rhetorical functions as their male counterparts. In particular, early 19th and 20th century writings by Arab women were influenced in style by both classical Arab heritage and from translated European writings to which they were exposed with the rise of the printing press. Women writers from this period generally wrote in a style that was non-vernacular and that belonged to high culture, often in a bid to prove their ability of intellectual production and to rebel against then common beliefs that belittled their intellect (Ashour et al., 2009, p. 15). Famous female authors from this time include the Lebanese novelists Alice Butrus al-Bustani who published *Sa'iba* in 1891, Zaynab Fawwaz with novels in 1893, 1899, and 1905, and Afifa Karam publishing *Badi'a wa Fu'ad* in 1906.

The 1930s and 1940s similarly saw a number of female authors emerge in the British and French controlled territories of Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon (see Shaban, 1999). These authors were often diverse in their writings, and penned articles for newspapers and the radio in addition to poetry and short stories. The 1950s witnessed the start of a creative surge of female writers in all types of literary genres, with writers like Amina al-Said, Widad Sakakini, Layla Ba'labkki, Collette Khuri, Latifa al-Zayyat, and Emily Nasrallah publishing a number of well-known novels. Their works, and the works of subsequent female authors from the region, often examined women's relationships, both with themselves and with men and their parents, in addition to issues related to the political and social environment in which they lived (Elayan, 2012; Saeed, 2000).

In the second half of the 20th century Arab women's creative writing began to focus more often on short stories and novels. Little attention was given to drama and so relatively few Arab women playwrights were active during this time. These short stories and novels tended to focus on issues of the struggle for independence from European control, civil wars, political oppression, and corruption, in addition to their roles as women in traditionally patriarchal societies. Female writers were also often actively involved in the female liberation movement. Ashour et al. (2009) claim that "Arab women would have not contributed to literature without the call to escape the bonds of the enclosed home and enter the public sphere, even shape it to a certain degree" (p. 4). Of course, this movement was also greatly aided by the education women received in the European-mandated territories of the Arab world at both the school and tertiary levels, while prominent male writers such as Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid in Egypt, Amin al-Rayhani in Lebanon, and the poets Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi and Ma'ruf al-Rasafi in Iraq, also publicly supported women rights.

After the independence of Arab nations from European colonialism, highlighted by the British withdrawal from Aden and Bahrain in 1967 and 1971 respectively, the last two decades of the 20th century found Arab women authors active in nations including Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. Again, their literary interests and outlets tended to be varied, with many of their works featuring in magazines, periodicals, biographies, and novels. During this period, women's associations and literary salons led by women also contributed to their literary development.

However, despite this, it was still common for female authors to publish under pseudonyms, even though women associations often encouraged them to take full ownership of their work.

In spite of this long tradition, Western interest in female Arab writers is often considered a relatively new phenomenon and one that is tied to Western perceptions of women in the Arab world as subject to systematic oppression and mistreatment (Amireh, 1996; Tag-El-Din, 2009). These perceptions have contributed to a situation in which there is greater consumer interest in Western nations for literary works, especially novels, from Arab female than male writers, with Arabic authors often altering their work to meet Western market demand (Faiq, 2004). This is an issue that is intricately linked with the contemporary translation of Arabic literary works into European languages and the way that these translations contribute to the discourse of Arab identity.

Translation and Arab Identity

Van Leeuwen (2004) highlights the way that translation, or the transfer of literary texts between cultures, is a political activity that encompasses not only cultural, historical and political relations, but also issues of cultural identification and self-representation. In this way, literary translations are closely linked with power relations and thus help create and reinforce divisions between dominated and hegemonic societies. The author continues that the translation of Arabic literary works into European languages may have actually “prevented the emergence of an authentic discourse on Arab identity, since the problem of identity was wholly seen through the prism of European conceptions” (p. 16).

Of course, identity is an elusive concept and represents a dynamic process rather than a static condition. As an ongoing construction, identity is the result of past, present, and future experiences and is rooted in an individual’s upbringing and life experiences. A myriad of factors interact to “construct and construe the process of identification” (Hughes, 2011, p. 1), and these act to shape our sense of affiliation either consciously or subconsciously. For these reasons, identity is not entirely within a person’s control, but must, to an extent, rely on the perceptions of others – whether this identity is placed upon an individual by others or whether that person looks for acknowledgement of their identity by others. For these reasons, identity is highly contingent on context and socio-economic circumstances, and is “constructed and transformed in relation to power both within the self and in relation to the community” (Hughes, 2011, p. 1).

With reference to socio-economic circumstance, the quest for modernity across the Arab world has had important ramifications for the discourse of “Arab” identity. Colonialism has undoubtedly affected Arab societies as European powers sought to mold these societies into the images they desired for the purpose of serving their strategic, economic or political interests (Hughes, 2011; Said, 1978). The changing nature of traditional Arab communities, greatly influenced by social and economic development accompanying the “oil boom”, globalization, and widespread access to free government education and English-medium universities and colleges, has made Arabs question their identities and modernization as reflected in Tayeb Salih’s 1966 novel *Seasons of Migration to the North*.

This questioning has been greatly influenced by the way in which the West views the Arab world as almost a counterpoint to Western development and “civilization”. For example, Edward Said’s (1978) seminal work *Orientalism* describes the process through which Western,

and especially French and British, nations sought to “other” Arabs in order to build a rationalization for their dominance and control of Arab lands. In this way, the Orient was positioned in direct relation to the Occident as mysterious, sensual, dangerous, traditional, backward and, above, all, in need of rescuing through European enlightenment. The prevalence of this discourse, Said continues, can be witnessed in the academies, foreign offices, and literature of the West – all of which, as captured succinctly by the book’s inscription which features a quote from Karl Marx, act together to represent an Arab world built upon the assumption that Arabs are not capable of representing themselves - “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented”.

It is in literature itself that the interaction between “identity and the religious, political, secular, social, and sexual factors that make and re-make inter-subjective experience” can be perhaps most readily witnessed (Hughes, 2011, p. 1). Literature reflects the histories of societies, and similarly reflects the waves that went through them, be these fundamental, colonial, secular, or modern. These waves form the discourse of literature that reflects identity. Each novel or short story is about a certain setting in time or place and deals with a certain issue or problem, reflecting actions and underlying beliefs of characters which are a result of culture. For instance, Tayeb Salih’s *Seasons of Migration* “shows how colonial power dismantled and transformed modes of identification as such, leaving deeper chasms in how people experienced life and community” (Hughes, 2011, p. 12). The Palestinian novelist Sahar Khelifeh’s *Wild Thorns* tells of the struggles of Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories. While all desire a unified community, they all differ in ideas of the ways that such unification could be brought about.

These struggles to carve new identities in the post-colonial era, moreover, have been greatly impacted upon by the prevailing Western discourse of Orientalism which encompasses the ways in which Arab, and especially Arab Muslims, are portrayed in the media, literature, and even in the scholarly work of departments of Eastern studies, with one important issue being the translation of Arabic literary works into European languages. As stated above, cultural translation is no easy feat. It is rife with challenges, especially if the writer and the reader come from two very different worlds. In terms of the relationship between Orientalism and translation, Tag-El-Din (2009) states that “the West often consumes the East, not only in economic terms, but also consumes Eastern stories and creates literary discourses about the East, in order to perpetuate the myth of Eastern inferiority” (p. 22). The Western reader might partake in this subconsciously by reading a translated Arabic literary work with a stereotypical frame of mind which influences the type of reception the work is accorded (Amireh, 2000).

In addition, translation might appropriate concepts, content and even titles to suit the new audiences for which the translation is meant. This appropriation might emphasize and further foster stereotypes. For example, Nawal El Saadawi’s novel *The Hidden Face of Eve* originally carried the title *Al-Wajh al-ari lil mar’a al-arabiyah*, which literally means “The naked face of the Arab woman”. The new English title introduces a totally new meaning to the novel and conjures up images of veiled, helpless and subjugated Arab women. Summarizing Amireh’s interpretation of this change, Tag-El-Din (2009) states that the original title of the work “suggests that the Arab woman is revealed entirely and set free” (p. 27), while the translated title “suggests that Arab women are hidden” (p. 27) and hence conforms to a long-standing stereotype and makes both the title and Arab women exotic.

To suit foreign readers, sometimes writers and translators will mask or alter their ideologies just like El Saadawi altered her introduction to *The Hidden Face of Eve* omitting from it certain anti-imperialism rhetoric which supported Islam and the Iranian revolution of the late 1970s after the novel met with criticism in many parts of the West (Tag-El-Din, 2009). In this way, the translation and publication of Arabic literary works for different audiences can significantly change the original meaning of a text while also reinforcing the position of the East as different and, hence, inferior to the West.

In addition to the form that translated Arabic works take, Faiq (2004) offers the selection of works that are translated into English and French as another example of how Western publishing houses continue to reinforce the representations fostered by Orientalism. Faiq continues that the very small number of Arabic literary works currently chosen for translation into English and French pales in comparison to the number of works related to the Arab-Islamic world that were not originally written in Arabic. In this way, Western “authorities” on Arabs and Arabia are privileged over Arab authors themselves. Moreover, of the small number of Arabic works that are translated into European languages, Faiq states that almost all feature “images of a complicated orient, irremediably strange and different; yet familiar and exotic” (p. 12). This, however, Faiq not only blames on the publishing houses that select these works for translation, but also those Arab authors who write with the intention of being translated.

Peter Ripken (cited in Whitaker, 2004) also describes how Western publishing houses select books that reaffirm Western expectations of the East, which are often subjective, have a hidden agenda, or serve a certain purpose. Hence, publications containing the word ‘veil’ in the title are amongst the most preferred, with literary works by Arab women often advertised in seductive ways. Norma Khouri’s *Lost Love*, for example, became *Lost Honor* when appearing in the United States. The publisher also misleadingly advertised it as “a horrifying true story” that portrayed a honor killing in Jordan. This contributed to sales of the book reaching around 250,000 copies worldwide. Moreover, Said (1995) adds that, even though some publishers do offer a small number of what he describes as “truly first-rate literary work”, that these often go unnoticed because they apparently do not reiterate the clichés of Islam, violence, sensuality and so on.

As the example of Khouri’s *Lost Love* implies, one interesting exception to the limited interest in translating Arabic literature into European language that Said (1995) notes is the interest Western audiences have accorded to Arab women writers despite their relatively small number when compared to male authors (Cohen-Mor, 2005). This, Mureen Hrington (1994, cited in Amireh, 1996) claims, is due to the West’s interest in knowing more about the “unimaginable world of Arab women” (para. 14). As a result, Amireh continues that “the effort to translate Arab women writers into English is now more systematic” (para. 4) than ever, with publishers like Garnet and translation projects like that directed by the Palestinian poet, editor and translator, Salma Khadra, now making more and more literature by Arab women available in English and other European languages.

Already accustomed to negative stereotypes concerning the treatment and position Arab women, it is not uncommon to find European readers gripped by a single idea in a literary work. They might, for instance, ignore the totality of a story, the influence of the socio-cultural and historical contexts that have shaped the text, and the complexity of the characters and events of a

novel in favor of focusing exclusively on one constituent which is often not even central to the main theme. Tag-El-Din (2009) summarizes this situation neatly by stating, “Western fascination with Eastern exoticism, and aspects of Middle Eastern culture, such as female circumcision, or arranged marriages, lead one to focus on features of these texts which reaffirm the Western reader’s superiority in contrast to Arab culture” (p. 36). Or, as the author maintains, the discourse of Arab women’s oppression in patriarchal societies and their own inability to resist that oppression has become increasingly prevalent in the West since the events of September 11, 2001.

It is due to these reasons that Western interest in Arab women’s writing has been viewed with a degree of skepticism in Arab male literary circles, with even some female Arab writers sharing aspects of this concern. According to Amireh (1996), some critics question the innocence of the West’s interest in Arab women’s writing. For example, a number of critics have raised questions about the amount and type of interest that authors such as Nawal al-Saadawi’s have received. That is, since the publication of *The Hidden Face of Eve* and *Women at Point Zero*, El Saadawi’s work has been translated into numerous European languages making her one of the most translated of contemporary Arab writers. Amireh (2000) counts fourteen of her books that have been translated into English and that are sold in American and British bookshops. Many of these books are assigned in undergraduate and graduate classes on world literature and feminist theory. However, despite her success, Amireh (1996) sums up the position of critics of Nawal al-Saadawi’s work as follows:

They argue that she is acclaimed not so much because she champions women’s rights but because she tells the Western readers what they want to hear. In this view, the West welcomes her feminist critique of Arab culture because it confirms the existing stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims as backward, misogynist and violently oppressive (para. 6).

Because El Saadawi’s was aware that her writings might be used against her culture, she initially tried to clarify her ideology to avoid misinterpretation. However, she later displayed more signs of accommodation for her Western reader, especially after the criticism she received for her introduction to *The Hidden Face of Eve*. Amireh (2000) points out to the reception history of the book, which, in her opinion, portrays “the way an Arab woman writer’s text is transformed through translation, editing, and reviewing once it crosses cultural and national boundaries” (pp. 219-220). For example, the West’s disappointment at El Saadawi’s support of the Iranian revolution in her introduction to *The Hidden Face of Eve* led her to drop it completely from her 1982 edition. Instead, she emphasized how religion can be used by institutions to oppress people instead of guiding them in the third world. Although she continues to defend Islam in the new introduction, her tone, Amireh continues, is more lax than in the first version. In addition, the English translation was selective in choosing what to retain and what to omit. According to Amireh:

Entire chapters in the Arabic edition disappear from the English translation. Two chapters in particular, ‘Women’s Work at Home’ and ‘Arab Women and Socialism’, in which El Saadawi critiques capitalism’s exploitation of women and argues for a socialist economic and political system, are not in *The Hidden Face of Eve*... Also absent are passages that assert Arab women to be ahead of American and European women in

demanding equality for their sexes, that celebrate the progress Arab women have made, and that exhort them to see wars of liberation as empowering to them (p. 224).

In addition to these omissions, what has been added to the translated version of the book is also of great interest. The translation contains a new chapter entitled 'Circumcision of Girls', and, to accentuate this theme, the first section of the novel was entitled 'The Mutilated Half'. This emphasis, Amireh (2000) states, caused many Western readers to emphasize sections that appealed to them and that reaffirmed their prejudices. For example, Gornick's (1982, cited in Amireh, 2000, p. 226) one paragraph summary of the book focused on the dreadful act of circumcision and Islam, casting Arab women in the victim's role.

Many of El Saadawi's novels were reprinted in the West after September 11, 2001. Within the aftermath of the attacks on the United States, Tag-El-Din (2009, p. 35) stated there existed this "fear that her work will once be read with the narrowed eyes of the anger, grief, and confusion that plague an American nation trying to rationalize the events of that day". A more dangerous notion, Tag-El-Din continues, is using El Saadawi's brand of feminism and her writings to justify the superiority of the West to the Arab world with the possibility that the discourse this contributes to and reinforces might contribute to Western re-domination of the Middle East with the express purpose of emancipating its "enslaved" women. Amireh (2000, p. 215), argues that:

El Saadawi and her Arab feminist work are consumed by a Western audience in a context saturated by stereotypes of Arab culture and... this context of reception, to a large extent, ends up rewriting both the writer and her texts according to scripted first-world narratives about Arab women's oppression.

In this way, the West has not only misread *The Hidden Face of Eve* but has also misread El Saadawi herself, making her look as the lone campaigner for women's rights when she is clearly part of a long-tradition, and obscuring part of her message which said that Islam is not more oppressive of women than the other two Abrahamic religions. The West has also neglected her socialist ideologies and her recognition and acknowledgement of the progress Arab women have made in their quest of liberation and equality with men. In other words, in focusing on the role of Arab women as victims and fixating on the veil, harem, excision, and polygamy (Amireh, 1996), Western publishing houses and readers alike often miss the way in which Arab female writers have, according to Booth (2005, p. 4), "expressed the richness of their lives in writing, they have argued for societal change in attitudes and institutions – for expanded rights, re-thought gender roles, the power to choose a future".

Following Booth (2005), and despite the level of skepticism about the nature of Western interest in Arab women's writing, it can readily be argued that there is a lot to be gained from the translation of Arabic literary works into European languages if a broad range of writing, rather than a small number of selected pieces, is translated. Diversity, according to Amireh (1996), helps avoid both stereotyping and pigeon-holing, as does the translation of criticism leveled on literary work. Finally, while both these practices will help avoid contributing to the prevailing discourse of Orientalism as highlighted by Said (1978), Amireh claims that Western audiences need to engage in objective discussions of the translated literature, its context and the culture, so that prejudice is avoided and stereotyping is minimized. Achieving this, however, is easier said

than done, with Katz (2008) stating that such engagement requires readers “cultivating qualities of the mind and the capacity to recognize and analyze significance” (para. 6) – a measure of liberal education that is often incongruent with the prevailing Western discourse of Orientalism.

Conclusion

Arab literature has, especially since the rise of Islam and the golden age of the Abbasid Dynasty, been intricately tied with Arab identity. Its rich vocabulary and lyricism have been employed by Arabs across the many environments and situations in which they live to express epics, stories, historical events, wars, hardships, human emotions and experiences. For thousands of years, poetry was the medium through which this expression was made, though, with Napoleon’s invasion and short-term occupation of Egypt in the late eighteenth century, the establishment of the printing press in Egypt and possibly even Syria during this period, and the encouragement of French-medium missionary schools across Syria and Lebanon during the Egyptian Empire of Mohammed Ali Pasha, poetry eventually lost its supremacy to more Western literary forms, including short stories, novels, and newspaper articles.

During this period, the presses of Europe and the Arab world were busy translating Western literary works into Arabic, in much the same way that the translation project had become a storehouse for the great works of antiquity in Baghdad some seven centuries before, while Arabic texts were also widely distributed. This resulted in a culture of mimicry amongst Arab writers during the nineteenth century, with traditional Arabic rhetorical patterns either greatly altered or even lost during this period. It was also a time when the imperial discourse of Orientalism, especially after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of British and French mandates across Arab lands, became entrenched in the colonial administrations, academies, and popular discourse of the West. It is, in many ways, this discourse that still acts to define Arab identity today, especially after the events of September 11, 2001. This is clearly evident in the number of books appearing in Western nations about the Arab world that were not written by Arab authors themselves, the small number of translations of Arab authors, and the general demand for translated Arabic books that speak to Western expectations of female enslavement, victimization, and sensuality.

However, despite the constraints this discourse may place on the sense of Arab identity and the striving of Arab nations to console their post-colonial pasts with modernization and globalization, it should be reiterated here that the translation of Arabic literary works into European languages need not be an entirely negative experience. That is, if the selection of Arabic literature that is translated into English, French and so on is broadened, and if these texts are not edited to conform to Western stereotypes of Arabs, then they can teach us much about life as it is lived across the many and diverse countries and territories of the Arab world, and about the great efforts many of its citizens, including women, have made towards creating more just and equal societies.

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