

**Translated Arab Woman Writings:
The Translation of What an Arab Woman Can Be
(A case study: H. Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter* [حجر الضحك])**

The growth of interest in the writings by Arab women authors may be due to the increasing translations of these works. Indeed, although some critics assert that such an interest, mainly in the West, is not innocent and that it is of an orientalist nature, we cannot ignore the literary creativity Arab women writers do possess, and the genuine masterpieces of high literary merit they produce. These literary women and their productions not only did bring recognition to the contemporary Arab Woman's ability of being creative, but also it did bring a re-interpretation and a re-presentation of the "today" Arab woman .

In this paper, we attempt to explore the importance translated literary works of Arab women authors have by selecting a translated version of a bestselling Arabic novel حجر الضحك (Hajarou Dhahik). We also intend to focus on the importance of the implementation and the introducing of such works in English literature's curricula in parallel with the implementation of the LMD system in Algerian English departments.

At first, we have to point out that translating Arabic masterpieces of literature by Arab male writers has never been new as there were a lot of works by Naguib Mahfouz, Nizar Qabani, Mahmoud Darwish and others that were translated a short time after their publication in the Arabic language for the great success and the fame of these writers. What is relatively new is the boosting of translations of works by Arab women writers like Nawal Saadawi, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Hanane Sheikh and other significant Arab women writers. However, one may put forward this question: "**does the translation carry a similar literary merit as the original work?**" and if the original work was a success, "**will the translation be innovative and creative too?**" Such questions were proposed by the theorist, Umberto Eco in more than a work of his. In his book, *Mouse or Rat? (Translation as Negotiation)*, Eco dealt with many facets of the translation. He says:

"[...] the concept of faithfulness depends on the belief that translation is **a form of interpretation** and that translators must aim at rendering, not necessarily the intention of the author (...) but the intention of the text – the intention of the text being the outcome of an interpretative effort on the part of the reader, the critic or the translator." (Eco, 2004: 5)

According to Eco, translation is a *form of interpretation* from the part of the translator. He believed that translators do not change the intention of the author but rather that of the text because, for him, the text's intention itself is the product of the reader's, the critic's and the translator's interpretation. Therefore, we may sum up Eco's words by saying that translation is the outcome of not only the interpretation of the translator but also the interpretation of the reader and the critic. Moreover, translation is the meeting point of more than two subjectivities, two repertoires, and two interpretations, that of the author, of the translator, of the reader and of the critic.

Translating literary works from Arabic to English is one of the most complicated procedures of translations because of the divergence of the two languages. Arabic and English are very different languages with different literary traditions. Literacy in Arabic has been near universal only in the last generation. Much literary expression has been produced within a more **oral tradition**¹. The outstanding literary forms have been poetry and the short story, both of which appeal to the ear as much as the eye. English literature has been far more *bookish*, and reading a private, rather than a collective, habit. There are shifts in this generalisation with the emergence of performance poetry, audio-books and public readings. But English tends, in general, to be terser than Arabic. This is a challenge to the translator, who is translating not just words but shifting a work from one literary tradition to another.

It is a critical procedure when we are trying to capture a new readership for Arabic literature in translation. Translation theorists also talk of '**authoritative**' texts² where the creative flexibility may be more restricted. There are limited Arabic texts that can be seen as authoritative in this way. There have been 30 or 40 English renderings of the Holy Koran, a smaller number of translations of the Hadith. There have been in the last 300 years far more versions of *A Thousand and One Nights*³ (ألف ليلة و ليلة). Of post-1945 literature, there have been many English translations of some poetry – especially of Mahmud Darwish. Some of the plays of Tawfiq al-Hakim and one play by the Syrian Sa'dallah Wannus have been translated and published in more than one version, but nearly no novel or short story has been translated more than once. (www.literarytranslations.com). As theorists talk of the issue of whether to take the reader to the book or the book to the reader, the whole point about literary translation is that the potential reader, especially of an Arabic text in translation, is not likely to read the original. That is why she or he is reading it in translation.

Thus, translating literary works from Arabic to English or any other foreign language risks not to provide the Western readership with all the features of beauty, aesthetics and creativity the original text carries, but it is not always the case. If the original work is genuinely a creative masterpiece of literature, albeit being translated to a foreign language, it will 'safeguard' its originality and creativity whether through characterization, through the narrative technique and why not through the figures of speech. What may not be translated, to our mind, is the cultural aspect of a given literary work.

If we go back to translated works of contemporary Arab women writers, we must not deny that Nawal Saadawi, the Egyptian writer, is known to be the first Arab woman to be widely read in Europe. Her first book of fiction 'الوجه'

'العاري للمرأة العربية' (The Hidden Face of Eve), first published in Arabic in 1977 and later published in English in 1980, has become a classic. N. Saadawi's second novel امرأة عند نقطة الصفر (1973) (English version: Woman at Point Zero, 1980) has opened the door to thirteen other books by Saadawi (all have been translated in English), and thus N. Saadawi has become the most read of all Arab women novelists in the West, and she might be considered to be the one who have shaken the Western awareness of how an Arab woman might be represented.

Nevertheless, a lot of critics in the Arab world have doubted this interest in N. Saadawi's productions, evaluated by some critics as being non-fiction books or of low literary merits. Alia Mamdouh, in an interview to the Arabic newspaper "Al Hayat", on May the 20th 1996, says: "Nawal el-Saadawi does not represent the true picture of the creativity of Arab women." Ahdaf Soueif, for the same newspaper, says: "El-Saadawi writes scientific research which is good. But she writes bad novels and it is unfair that the West thinks that what she writes represents Arab women's creative writing." ("Al Hayat", May the 20th 1996). Some critics asserted that such Western interest in Saadawi's novels is not innocent and it just serves their views and re-presentations of the Arab woman as being oppressed, non-educated and sexually exploited. This portrait is omnipresent in N. Saadawi's novels, and some would think that this is what made Nawel Saadawi marketable in Europe as much as in the United States of America.

This viewpoint does not hide the fact that the Arab woman author is perceived in the West. On another hand, there have been great efforts to translate novels and poems by writers from the Arabic language to other foreign languages. One of these efforts is the Project for Translation from Arabic (PROTA), founded by the Palestinian writer Salma Alkhadra Jeyoussi, and the series of English translated novels by Arab women writers launched by Garnet Publishing of London under the supervision of the Jordanian novelist Fadia Faqir.

When we, Arab readers, read the works of writers like Sahar Khalifah (Palestine), Ahlam Mousteghanmi (Algeria), Hanane Sheikh or Huda Barakat (Lebanon), we are impressed by the literary creativity these women possess, and we believe that this literary creativity is unique and specific to Arab women writers in terms of the narrative technique, the characterization technique and the thematic of their works. So, how would a western reader perceive the literary creativeness and talent of Arab women writers through their translations?

The answer to the above question is the uprising bestselling translations of works by Arab women writers notably Sahar Khalifah, Hanane Sheikh, Huda Barakat and others. Huda Barakat's novel حجر الضحك (Hajarou Adhahik), for instance, has been translated into more than six languages including English, French, Turkish, Spanish and other languages. Thus, we deduce that even translations are appreciated by Western readers despite of that fact that translations do not carry the same literary aesthetic as the original version.

To argue that such a statement may be valid, we have chosen, for investigation, one of the successful translations by an Arab woman *The Stone of Laughter* (حجر الضحك). The latter is a novel written in 1990 by author Huda Barakat set during the Lebanese Civil War. The book was translated into English by Sophie Bennett. A bestselling book, *The Stone of Laughter* (حجر الضحك) is a winner of the Al-Naqid prize and first book by an Arab author to have a main character who is androgyne.

To see whether the translation of حجر الضحك, i.e. *The Stone of Laughter* is also appreciated by English readers, we will present two versions of the same extract: the first is the original version (Arabic) and the second is the English version. The following task is about an interesting exercise for us as readers. It aims at determining whether we (specialists who master the two languages of Arabic and English) might have the same literary experience by reading an extract of حجر الضحك [Hajarou Adhahik], i.e. from the original version, and its English translation.

The Arabic version :

في الجريدة عيد حقيقي... لا يشبه الأعياد التي اعتدناها. فالأعياد المعلنة التي نتهيا لها تنتهي قبل بدئها.. نظل نهيب ونتهيا حتى نسقط في الإعياء قبل حلول لحظتها المنتظرة. في العيد تتدخل الأخلاقية لاستنهاض الفرح والبهجة لذا سريعا يحل الضجر وجهدا ادعاء ما انقضى قبل أن يبدأ، فيصاب المرء بإحباط شديد لكثرة ما يصطنع الإندهاش والتلقائية... لكن العيد في الجريدة متخلص من كل هذا وواقع قلباً في منطقة حظر الفرح.. فالكهرباء المقطوعة قننت أضواء المكاتب والممرات. واشتداد القصف المضاد جعلها تبدو كخلفية كبيرة في أقصى درجات نشاطها وإنتاجيتها. التلكسات والهواتف وحركة خروج ودخول المصورين، بعضهم كان يعود بجروح طفيفة تزيد من جو التحفز وعناصر الإندهاش والمفاجأة، توافد أصدقاء الجريدة بحجة معرفة ما يجري وإجراء بعض الاتصالات، تعاضد وتأنر في حلقة رقص ضد الوحدة وضد كل ما هو خارج الجريدة، أي نفاذ من الموت الذي يقع خارجاً، بل تنظيماً له وتعاطياً معه يمنح الشعور بأنك فوق منطقة نفوذه معزول ونقي والقصف العشوائي ليس عشوائياً تماماً.. يعرف الجميع أن الجريدة لن تقصف لأن لكل عشوائية نظمها وقواعدها... والعاملون لا يتصرفون على أساس أن ذلك من البيهيات المعلنة بل يلتذون بتضمن هذه القاعدة فيغفلونها ويفعلون تصرفات تقول إن الجريدة كذلك ممكن أن يطالها القصف العشوائي ولكن.. إنهم، هم، لا يابهن، فالمهمة أكبر، وأكثر جدية من أن تهتم بنفسك ك فرد أو كمؤسسة... المهمة أكبر بكثير..."

(p. 38)

The English version :

"It was a festive day at the newspaper...not like the feast days we are used to.

The usual feasts, for which we prepare and which are over before they begun...which we get ready, which we get ourselves ready for until we fall over ahead of the moment we have been waiting for. The exasperation, the effort of keeping up the momentum of what is over before it has started, quickly spreads, so one always feels immensely frustrated by so much feigned surprise and artificial spontaneity...

But the feast at the newspaper, stripped bare of all this, made a little inroad into the prohibited joy zone... the fact that the electricity was cut off meant that the light in the offices and on the stairs were limited to a back-up supply. As the bombing and counter-bombing grew more intense, the newspaper seemed more and more like a huge,

buzzing hive. The telexes, the phones, the coming and going of the photographs, some of whom were coming back with minor wounds, made the atmosphere of constant alert and the elements of astonishments and surprise greater. Friends of the newspaper flocked in claiming that they knew what was going on and that they needed to make a few calls...weaving and turning together, in circling dance against solitude, against everything outside the newspaper, that is to say against the realm of death that lies outside, or rather, a circling dance to regulate it, to work with it, which allows you to feel as if you are above it, isolated, pure and...a saint.

The random bombing was not altogether random... anyone knows the newspaper will not be bombed for there are rules, there is a method in all mayhem... those who work there do not behave as though this were a well-known fact, but rather delight in being part of the rule and ignoring it, adopting postures that suggest that the random attack may also affect the newspaper, but... but they, they, pay no attention for the matter in hand is greater, and more serious, than worrying about oneself as an individual or as an organization... much greater... (p. 36)

By comparing the two extracts, we would assume that both passages are aesthetically beautiful but not necessarily identical. For instance, "anyone knows the newspaper will not be bombed for there are rules, there is a method in all mayhem" is not a word by word translation of القصف العشوائي ليس عشوائياً تماماً.. يعرف الجميع أن الجريدة لن . نقصف لأن لكل عشوائية نظمها وقواعدها. However, it does carry the same meaning as that of the original version.

As multilingual readers who master both Arabic and English, reading the two extracts at once may sound an interesting literary experience.

It is true that the original writer (H. Barakat) and the translator (S. Bennett) write in two different languages, and then have two different styles, but we ought to confess that the translated version is a mimesis, mimicry or imitation of the original one in terms of:

-Narration: The narrative order in *The Stone of Laughter* relies on the events of the Lebanese civil war. In fact, the narration in this novel does not follow a chronological order, but rather a repetitive rhythm which is the outcome of the rhythm of war. The recurrent use of words like: bombing, explosions, death, bombardment, noise, and diacritics like the three dots of suspension unveil a fracture in the narration and create a disruption in the narrative. This fact appears in the two versions.

-Characterization: The novel's protagonist, Khalil, is presented sometimes explicitly, at other times implicitly, as an androgynous character, a biologically "womanized" man who is socially rejected. Khalil's androgynous nature comes to an end once he becomes part of the male war makers (the newspaper's members), and this is what we read in both versions.

-Thematic: حجر الضحك was described by the literary critic Edward Kharrat as "the best novel written about the Lebanese civil war" because it deals with the struggle of Khalil, the protagonist who embodies the psychological and physical metamorphosis caused by the war, to resist taking part in the fighting and to define his identity in alternative terms. In a complex, but genuinely personal narrative, Barakat represents two figures that are marginal to the war: an androgynous male and heterodiegetic narrator whose voice is often interwoven with Khalil's, but who shows up at the very end of the novel. This thematic is obvious both in the English and Arabic version.

Thus, because the above features are the main elements of a work of fiction and they neither alter nor change from one version to another, a western reader may appreciate via these elements Barakat's work. If the translated version has preserved the specificity of these elements of fiction, it would surely carry part of the literary beauty the original version contains.

Indeed, reading for an Arab woman novelist translated works of significant literary creativity may contribute to the change the western mis-representation of the Arab Woman. The Arab female writers have proved to themselves, their compatriots and then to the West that they could deal with taboo themes and topics, that they could innovate distinct narrative technique, that they could create characters which have never been created, and then they could voice themselves by themselves.

As a matter of fact, as university lecturers and literature teachers we perceive a successful didactic experience by teaching translated works of contemporary Arab women writers to LMD students. Our arguments lie in two main reasons. First, the Arabic cultural background of such works will grab the students' sense of belongingness, and this will motivate them to appreciate rather than swallow literature seminars. Then, because the authors are Arab women, this may attract the students' sense of curiosity to read for a woman who is "Arab". Such suggestions are speculative and reflective at the same time, but they can offer us, as lecturers, the opportunity to bring new methods and curricula for the sake of helping students appreciate Literature as an art and as a discipline at the same time.

Notes:

1. The Arabic literature, like many African and Asian literatures, has long relied on the oral tradition of transmitting the beauty of literary texts like poetry and stories. In the Djahili era (the era preceding the coming of Islam, 5th century AD), there were many markets Arab tribes would call poetry markets like Souq Oukaz (سوق عكاظ) to which poets from all over the Arabian Peninsula would come to read their poems for large audiences. Even nowadays, we still have people like Al-Barrah (البراح) in Morocco and Algeria, and Al-hakawati (الحكواتي) in Syria and Egypt, around whom gather an audience and start reading their stories and poems.

2. These are the texts written in Arabic that 'do not allow' much freedom for translations. We are pointing here at, mostly, religious texts like Qur'an, and the Hadiths (the sayings of the Prophet Mohamed). Although there are

English, French, German... translations of these texts, the translated versions go through a very strict censorship for fear to change the meanings of words of sentences because of their holiness.

3. **A Thousand and One Nights** كتاب ألف ليلة وليلة *Kitāb 'alf layla wa-layla* is a collection of folk tales and other stories. The original concept is most likely derived from a pre-Islamic Persian prototype that probably relied partly on Indian elements but the work as we have it was collected over many centuries by various authors, translators and scholars across the Middle East and North Africa. The tales themselves trace their roots back to ancient and medieval Arabic, Persian, Indian, Egyptian and Mesopotamian folk-lore and literature.

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