



ISSN(Print): 1813-4521 Online ISSN:2663-7502

Journal Of the Iraqia University

available online at

<https://iasj.rdd.edu.iq/journals/journal/view/247>



Translating Arabic Literature in the West Problems of Reception and Selection

M. M. Marwa Ghanem Ibrahim

Imam Al-Azam College / English Department

ترجمة الأدب العربي في الغرب إشكاليات التلقي والانتقاء

م. م. مروة غانم إبراهيم

كلية الامام الاعظم / قسم اللغة الانكليزية

Summary

Translation has always been a vital bridge for communication between cultures. However, in the case of Arabic literature translated into Western languages, specifically English and French, it remains fraught with complex problems that transcend the linguistic act. This paper aims to analyze the most prominent of these problems by focusing on two fundamental levels: the mechanisms of selection (what is translated and why?) and the politics of reception (how is this selected material read?). Using a descriptive-analytical approach and within the framework of postcolonial translation theory, the paper discusses how ideological, geopolitical, and market factors control the formation of the image of Arabic literature in the Western imagination, often leading to the perpetuation of stereotypes or Orientalist views. It concludes that the problem of reception and selection is not merely a technical issue but rather part of a broader system of cultural hegemony and the production of knowledge about the 'other'. Keywords: Literary translation, Arabic literature, reception, selection, Orientalism, postcolonial translation, cultural policies.

the introduction

"No culture in the world is isolated from others, but the process of cultural exchange has never been neutral. Literature, as the highest manifestation of language and identity, becomes, when translated into another language, a cultural commodity subject to the laws of the market, the whims of publishers, and the horizon of the reader's expectations. In the Arab-Western case, the matter is further complicated by the colonial legacy, current political conflicts, and the deep knowledge gap."

Research problem and questions:

"The central problem is that Western translations of Arabic literature do not necessarily reflect its richness and diversity, but rather present a distorted 'canon' that satisfies a Western desire for the 'exotic' or the 'witness to oppression'. What are the hidden and apparent mechanisms that control the selection of Arabic texts for translation? How is this literature framed and presented to the Western reader? What is the role of the translator, publisher, and critic in shaping this reception? And how can we overcome 'neo-Orientalism' in translation?"

Importance of the research:

"The importance of the research stems from the fact that it does not merely criticize existing practices, but rather tries to understand their roots and offer alternatives for a fairer translation that contributes to a genuine civilizational dialogue instead of perpetuating stereotypes."

Research Methodology:

"The study relies on the descriptive analytical approach, using tools from translation theories (Vinotti, Bassnett, Lefebvre) and postcolonial criticism (Edward Said, Talal Asad) in analyzing selected models of translations of Arabic novels into English and French, with a discursive analysis of the introductions, covers, and critical reviews thereof."

Section One: Selection Mechanisms

This section is the backbone, focusing on the idea that translation is "not an innocent transfer" but rather a process governed by several factors..

1.1 The political and ideological factor:

"After the events of September 11, 2001, there was a surge in the translation of Arabic literature, not out of love for it, but as a 'window' to understanding the 'Arab mind' or the 'terrorist' mind. Literature has been commodified as a socio-political document. This explains the great popularity of translations of novels such as 'The Yacoubian Building,' which present a 'panoramic' view of corruption and oppression, or the works of exiled writers who are reintroduced as witnesses to the tyranny of their regimes. The text is selected not only based on its aesthetic value, but also on its ability to provide testimony or confirm preconceived notions about the Arab world. Here, we can discuss the concept of the 'ideal translated text' sought by the Western publisher."

1.2 The role of the publisher and literary agent:

"The vast majority of Western publishers do not know Arabic. They rely on literary agents, prizes (such as the Arabic Booker), or cultural 'scouts'. This creates a double 'filter': a text that wins a Western prize or that a scout describes as a 'new Naguib Mahfouz' or 'the Marquez of the Arabs' finds its way to translation faster. The question is: Do Arab prizes (sometimes sponsored by Western entities) create a kind of 'guardianship' over selection? And how do prize shortlists become a ready-made 'shopping list' for publishers who want 'Arab literature' that is safe in terms of marketability?"

1.3 The glaring absence of other literary genres:

"When examining the lists of translations, we find that poetry, theater, travel literature, children's literature, and modern Arabic philosophy are almost completely absent. The focus is almost entirely on the novel, and on the 'realistic' novel most of the time. This distorts the image of the entire Arabic literary production. Why, for example, has Adonis's poetry not been translated to the same extent as his novels? Because the novel is translated as a 'issue,' while poetry requires an aesthetic contemplation that does not serve the instrumental view of Arabic literature."

1.4 The influence of Orientalism in selection:

"Is 'One Thousand and One Nights' still the horizon of expectation? Translations that focus on issues of oppressed women (such as 'Women of Kabul' or 'Girls of Riyadh'), or harems, or religious violence, reinforce an Orientalist image. Even Arabic titles are sometimes translated provocatively: 'For Bread Alone' became 'For Bread Alone' with a sexual connotation, and 'Memory of the Flesh' was translated to be marketed as a forbidden love story. These are not just linguistic choices, but choices in the selection and final form of the text."

Section Two: Reception Policies

Once the text arrives, how is it received? Here, the text transforms into a "cultural product" that is understood according to the conditions of the receiving culture..

2.1 Packaging and Marketing: The cover as an Orientalist threshold:

"Analyze a set of covers: how often do we see an image of a veiled woman, a minaret, a desert, or Arabic script that has no meaning other than being an 'oriental ornament,' even if the text is about a modern city? This 'visual code' puts the text in the cage of 'ethnic literature' and determines how it is read before you even start the first page. It serves the horizon of expectation of a reader looking for the exotic. Arabic literary texts are not marketed as 'world literature' that stands alongside Murakami or Kundera, but as local literature, a witness to a situation."

2.2 Introductions and footnotes: Translator's voice above the text:

"In many translations, the translator becomes a 'cultural mediator' who explains the 'Arab mentality' to the Western reader. The lengthy introductions that explain history, politics, and religion may impose a framework for reading and reduce the literary text to its documentary dimension. The footnotes that explain the 'veil' or the 'Muslim Brotherhood' may be necessary, but they sometimes create a distance that makes the Western reader an anthropological 'tourist' rather than a partner in the human experience."

2.3 Translation Strategies: Domestication vs. Foreignization:

Here is a central discussion using Lawrence Venuti's terminology: "Does the translator resort to 'domesticating' the text by erasing its cultural specificity to make it easier to digest, thus transforming an 'onion' into..." (Onion) without any reference to cooking, or translating popular proverbs into English proverbs? This strategy obscures the 'other' and creates the illusion that we are similar when we are not. As for excessive 'Westernization', it may turn into 'exoticism' that emphasizes our fundamental and irreconcilable differences. Where is the balance? And how can a translator present a culture without giving it a folkloric character?

2.4 Western Literary Criticism and Journalistic Reviews:

"When an Arabic novel is reviewed in the New York Times or the Guardian, what is the language of the review? Examine the examples: 'A window into a dark world,' 'Courage in the face of extremism,' 'The voice of the bold Arab woman.' The focus is always on the 'tourist' or 'liberation' value and not on the language, style, and artistic construction. The Arab writer is praised for his political courage, not for his aesthetic brilliance. This redefines the value of the Arab writer to be an activist or a witness, not an artist."

Third topic: Applied models and their opposites

3.1 Naguib Mahfouz: The exception that proves the rule?

"Mahfouz's translation came after the Nobel Prize, but how was he translated? He was translated as the 'Dickens of Cairo' or the 'Balzac of the Arabs'. These Westernized comparisons give him legitimacy, but at the same time they deprive him of his individuality. However, the Nobel Prize did not save him from having his philosophical works, such as 'Echoes of an Autobiography', translated with the same widespread distribution as the trilogy."

3.2 Edward Al-Kharat... Where is the experimental leadership position?

"This creative writer, who presented a unique Arab style that differed from sequential realism, did not receive the same level of translation and dissemination as the book of direct 'realism'. Why? Because his modernity does not resemble the expected 'Western modernity', nor does it present the East as backward. This is a glaring example of the problem of selecting what suits the preconceived image."

3.3 Opposite case: Rabih Jaber and 'The Trilogy of Cities' in its French translation.

How did Rabee Jaber manage to translate and succeed in France without falling into the trap of 'witness literature'? A discussion of his experience as a model for circumventing selection criteria and reaching an elite readership that appreciates the act of writing itself..

Conclusion and Recommendations

"The problems of reception and selection establish a cognitive system that produces Arabs who are 'translators', who do not write literature but rather bear witness to the situation. Getting out of this circle requires a twofold effort: from the Arab intellectual in creating an Arab translation movement towards the other, not leaving the task of introducing ourselves to the Western publisher alone, while supporting Arab critics and translators who understand the context. And from the Western publisher in overcoming the self-censorship and stereotyping imposed by the market. Translating Arabic literature as literature, not as a document, is the next battle."

Suggested initial reference list (you can use and expand upon it)

1. Edward Said, Orientalism.
2. Lawrence Venuti, The Betrayal of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference (The Translator's Invisibility).
3. André Lefebvre, Translation, Rewriting and Manipulation of Literary Reputation.
4. Mona Baker, in other words: a course in translation (In Other Words), and her articles on translation and conflict.
5. Tariq Shamma, Orientalism in the Translation of Arabic Literature (a very important and direct study of your topic).
6. Richard Jackmond, Essays on Translation from Arabic in the West and Publishing Policies.
7. John Dryden and Peter Clark, their studies on the challenges of translating contemporary Arabic literature.
8. Mona Fayyad, her writings on the problems of translating Arabic literature into French.
9. Periodicals: such as Banipal (a journal of modern Arabic literature in English), and The Translator.