

IDEOLOGY AND RESISTANCE IN THE TRANSLATED  
ARABIC LITERATURE: THE DISCOURSE OF  
ORIENTALISM AND COUNTER-ORIENTALISM

الأيدولوجيا والمقاومة في الأدب العربي المترجم  
خطابه الاستشراق ومكافحة الاستشراق

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### Abstract

During the 20th century, studies of translation adapted a linguistic approach to translation that considers translation as primarily or exclusively an operation applied in language in which linguists J. C. Catford, Eugene A. Nida, Peter Newmark, and Basil Hatim emphasize the priority of formalist aspects in translation. In the late of twentieth century, this linguistic approach is followed by “cultural turn”, a new approach to translation pioneered by Bassnett Susan and Lefevere André. This approach draws attention to issues that are beyond the equivalence and fidelity namely history, culture, and ideology. Therefore, cultural studies, feminism, post colonialism and Orientalism have offered new perspectives to translation studies. Arabic literature among other world literatures is often translated into foreign languages. The main motive behind the translation of the Arabic text into English differs from one translation to the

other. This paper addresses the issue of whether translation, in postcolonial discourse, can be considered as a perpetuation of western orientalism or is it a counter-orientalist strategy to help in re-shaping the western readers' perception of the Orient/Arabs.

Key words: Arabic literature, Counter-orientalist strategy, Cultural turn, Orientalism, Translation.

#### ملخص

خلال القرن العشرين، قامت دراسات الترجمة بتكييف مقاربة لغوية للترجمة، تُعتبر الترجمة بشكلٍ أساسيٍّ أو حصريٍّ، عملية مطبقة في اللغة، حيث يؤكد اللغويون "جي سي كاتفورد" و"يوجين أ. نيدا" و"بيتر نيومارك" و"باسل حاتم" على أولوية الجوانب الشكلية في الترجمة. وفي أواخر القرن العشرين، تبع هذا النهج اللغوي "منعطف ثقافي"، وهو نهج جديد للترجمة ابتكره "باسنيت سوزان" و"ليفيفر أندريه". يلفت هذا النهج الانتباه إلى القضايا التي تتجاوز التكافؤ والإخلاص، وهي التاريخ والثقافة والأيديولوجيا، لذلك قدمت الدراسات الثقافية والنسوية وما بعد الاستعمار والاستشراق، وجهات نظر جديدة لدراسات الترجمة. غالبًا ما يُترجم الأدب العربي من بين الآداب العالمية الأخرى إلى اللغات الأجنبية، ويختلف الدافع الرئيسي وراء ترجمة النص العربي إلى اللغة الإنجليزية، من ترجمة إلى أخرى. تتناول هذه الورقة مسألة ما إذا كانت الترجمة، في الخطاب مابعد الكولونيالي، يمكن اعتبارها استمرارًا للاستشراق الغربي أم أنها استراتيجية مناهضة للاستشراق للمساعدة في إعادة تشكيل تصوّر القراء الغربيين للشرق / العرب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ترجمة، أدب عربي، انعطاف ثقافي، استشراق، استراتيجية مضادة للاستشراق.

## Introduction

In the aftermath of the events of September 11, the West launched a fierce war against Islam and Arabism. It depicted Arabs as either terrorists or illiterate backward people. Islam is also presented as a religion of violence, extremism and oppression. It seems that this image does not differ much from the one that is presented by Orientalists in which Islamic Orient is often associated with all aspects of bloodshed and violence. Edward Said describes the orientalist representation of Arabs 'as camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization' (Said 108).

This fanciful representation as it is accompanied by the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) leads to a growing sense of Islamophobia and Arabophobia that strengthens the stereotypical image of the Arab as terrorists, killers, and misogynists (Sadek). Therefore, the Orient/Arabs must work to disprove this image mainly through translating the authentic social realities as an anti-orientalist strategy. Douglas Robinson claims for this double use of translation as that the words of colonized populations can be 'cited' or 'translated' or 'reread/rewritten' by colonizers in ways that reframe the colonized culture in the interests of colonial domination, as well as by postcolonial theorists who can use the same processes to decolonize their own individual and collective minds (93). Thus, translation can be used to resist or redirect colonial or postcolonial powers. In this essay, I consider the way translation is used in the literary context as both a source of power for enhancing orientalist propaganda as well as a means of resistance for a counter-hegemonic thought in two different translated Arab works namely; *Chicago* by Alaa Al Aswany and *Returning to Haifa* by Ghasan Kanafani.

### 1. Orientalism and Ideological Translation

Translation is often regarded as source of power and domination. The manipulative power of translation is significant in the orientalist discourse in which translation is often functioned as a cultural hegemonic excuse by some Western countries. Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere argue that translations are not made in a vacuum and that translators function in a given culture at a given time. Therefore, it is obvious that some hegemonic

cultures typically choose particular works that fit their imperialist interests in which they fit the prevailing stereotypes. Bassnett and Lefevere also believe that the way translators understand themselves and their culture is one of the factors that may influence the way in which they translate (Bassnett and Lefevere).

Western publishers often enjoy a manipulative cultural and economic hegemony in translations from African, Asian, and South American literatures that is based on ethnocentric and imperialist strategies (venuti 167). *In Translation and cultural hegemony: the case of French-Arabic translation*, Richard Jacquemond offered an explanation of the translational inequalities between the dominated subaltern and the hegemonic cultures. Jacquemond also maintains that the hegemonic culture will only translate those works by authors in dominated culture that fit the former's preconceived notions of the latter and that authors in a dominated culture who dream of reaching a larger audience will tend to write for translation into a hegemonic language, and this will require some degree of compliance with stereotypes (Jacquemond 139-158). Lawrence Venuti also rejects the notion of neutrality in translation in which he insists on the hegemonic function of translation. He argues that "The translation enact a process of identity formation in which colonizer and colonized, transnational corporation and indigenous consumer, are positioned unequally"(venuti 165). This manipulative function of translation is manifested in some Arab translated writings in which some Arab writers work in the same orientalist vein that the West used to. Therefore, some Western publishers often choose specific Arab texts that serve their orientalist project to be translated.

Innumerable images of terrorism, violence and oppression were, for a long time, associated with Arabs and Islam. It is because of the Western Orientalism that portrays and perceives male and female Muslims in a way that provokes disgust and hatred toward them; Islamic society is often associated with malevolence, sexuality and primitiveness. Orientalists presented Arab men as barbaric, dominant and oppressors. Whereas, women are depicted as chattel for men's use and sexual satisfaction. The

Arab world in the orientalist portrayal has been described as “a place of sexual indulgence and an endless sensual gratification” (Hasan 32).

Ever since the picture was seen as an effective tool to direct and orient the audience’s feelings and thought as it is said that, ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’. For that, orientalist discourse introduced to the world a collection of postcards that associates the Orient with excessive sexuality. The orientalist paintings of the harem and the seraglio, for instance, are example of the assumptions the West has about the Eastern women and the way they perceive them. These paintings deepened the stereotypes about the oriental women as sexual objects. Eugène Delacroix, Le Corbusier or Charles Édouard Jeanneret Gris and Jean Geiser Vintage among others sketch Algerian women in their paintings. These sketches and postcards, according to Malek Alloula, are not an actual representation of the Algerian woman rather it is a Western fantasy that are considered as an attempt to unveil Algerian women. Alloula maintains that Orientalism, both pictorial and literary, has made its contribution to the definition of the variegated elements of the sweet dream in which the West has been wallowing for more than four centuries (3).

Hence, The West continues to present distorted and biased images against Arabs and Muslims in general, and Arab women in particular, as it consistently presented them in stereotypical images that reflect surrender, passivity, illiteracy, and subordination to men and society. However, they ignore what Arab females have achieved in different fields. Unfortunately, Arab writers themselves underpin this image in some of their books. Many Arab writings represent Arab women in the same way that orientalists did; as oppressed, marginalized and exposed to sexual domination and exploitation, in which they distort the image of the “self” in their literatures. This similarity reflects to us, in depth, the role of the negative image, which has been transmitted by the Western writings and media, with their terrible propaganda.

Alaa Al Aswany, an Egyptian novelist, presents stories of an Egyptian migrant community in his novel *Chicago*. The novel describes the social life of these immigrants in its many shapes and different contexts. Unfortunately, in most of the details, Arab men are depicted as being fanatical, authoritarian and sexual by focusing on the negative qualities of a specific group of the Egyptian society only. In their relationships with women, Arab men are portrayed as cowards, sexual and oppressors who

tend to get profit of women sexually, physically as well as emotionally. Al Aswany states:

The young officer Safwat Shakir, after obtaining his supervisor's permission, introduced a new protocol: instead of beatings and electric shocks, he would arrest the suspect's wife (his mother or sister if he was a bachelor); then he would order his men to take off the woman's clothes, one item at a time until she was naked, then they would begin to fondle her body in front of her husband, who would soon collapse and confess to whatever he was asked to confess (Al Aswany 226 ).

In a related context, Al Aswany examines the marital relationship between Ahmed Danana, the security agent and a student in the Illinois University and his wife Marwa Nofal, the daughter of one of the wealthy merchants. This relationship is branded by enormous exploitation and opportunism. The husband's stinginess and greed led him to rent his wife to Safwat Shaker, the former general, and one of the Egyptian embassy intelligence workers. In one of the provocative conversations between the couple, Al Aswany describes:

"He said to me explicitly that he wanted to have a relationship with me. Do you understand?"  
"Of course I understand. I will teach him a lesson that he won't forget. You'll see for yourself. All I am asking is that we wait just one month, no more. If I anger him now, he can destroy me with the stroke of a pen. I'll just give him time until the president's visit is over and he enrolls me in the other university (311.312).

Evidently, neither the behavior of Ahmed Danana nor that of Safwat Shaker really give a realistic insight to the way Arab men treat women in the Arab culture and Islam. We should argue that the novel failed in depicting an authentic image of the oriental men with all his positive features; such as magnanimity, chivalry, generosity, dignity and compassion.

The novel also presents stereotypes of female characters who, whatever their personalities, level of culture, intellectual orientations and social perspectives, are presented as sexual projects. The image of women

as a project for sex is sharp and explicit in Chicago. The human levels and cultural components of the character are not exposed to the extent that the details of female body and sexual relations are presented. The novel, indeed, mirrors the orientalist vision of the traditional oriental women who are occupied by sex and sexual intrigue and accept humiliation and subservience to satisfy male desires. Obviously, Al Aswany does not produce anything but repeated copies that are molded on the same way of thinking. The female characters are just repeated and naive examples of girls whose ultimate aspirations are marriage, and therefore all that one thinks about is satisfying her man with a naive motherly sense (103), like the case with Shaymaa Al-Mohammady, a rural student from Tanta, who in order to please Tariq Haseeb; changed her walk, clothes and even her religious principles. As it is mentioned:

“She cooked for him on Sundays and knew by heart all the dishes he loved: rice pilaf, okra, meat and potato casserole, and baked macaroni. For dessert he liked Umm Ali, mahalabiya, and rice pudding. Thank God she had learned to cook from her mother, winning his admiration” (103).

Despite her intellectual and educational level, Shaymaa is portrayed as a girl whose interest is limited to getting close to a man through flattering him with cooking and sex, which does not reflect the real image of most Arab girls who give up many of their dreams for the sake of achieving professional and academic career. It is as if there is no model for an oriental girl other than these ready-made models.

The novel conformed to the preconceived notion through which it shaped its characters, and adapted them to this stereotype, that is consistent with Western visions against Arabism and Islam. It seems that the novel, apparently, searches to arouse the appetite of Western publishing houses. In an interview with Al Riyadh Newspaper, Anthony Calderbank, an English translator of contemporary Arabic literature, comments on the choice of novels to be translated by publishers, he declares:

There are, of course, some stereotypes that are popular about the other in all societies, and sometimes the publisher tends to publish stories or novels that serve these ideas. For example, there may be a demand for female writings that suggest that

Arab women are oppressed without focusing on other aspects of their lives (El Samiri).

According to the preceding lines, it seems that writers, whose works translated to western languages, are often, those who are affected by the western thought. Their works often tend to achieve cultural transformations in Arab societies, changes in social relations and the status of women. Hence, the novel falls into a stereotyped state of the Arab Muslim immigrant, and it is an image despite its many true aspects, but it blinds us to many other aspects of the picture as well, where many successful immigrants are successful and coherent. Therefore, it is obvious that orientalist do not spare any effort in order to distort the image of the other and achieve their goals of subjugating the subordinate culture.

## **2. Translation as a counter-orientalist strategy**

The role of translation does not stop at enriching the recipient's culture with information about the source culture, but rather goes beyond that to influence social and political policies to enhance its role to serve ideologies and to 'perpetuating the unequal power relations among peoples, races, and languages'( Niranjana). , in particular, translating works related to a specific ideological thought. Thus, the West continue to indulge the image of the Orient through translating works that serve their former orientalist agenda. However, Translation can also be regarded as one of the powerful strategies used in the decolonization process as well. Translation is used actively in the counter orientalist discourse through which the self (the Orient) passes into the other (the West) with more reliability.

The Orient often takes the position of unresponsiveness against western hegemony. This is probably because it does not have any political supremacy, nor the necessary media capabilities that allow it to stand up to the onslaught of orientalist stereotypes. However, the scarcity of political power should not stop the oriental cultures from defending themselves against their representation by the West as Karl Marx once said that the East cannot represent itself and that it must be represented. Hence, Arabs should claim the invalidity of the mercilessness and strangeness that they have been related to for decades. They must work in a counter-discourse to scrutinize the way in which they are represented in the western texts as well



as in the translated Arab writings to help rectifying the orientalist conceived notions about themselves.

Translation is essential factor in the ongoing process of decolonization as it stimulates new regionally and globally conceptions about the Orient and help to adjust the image of the so-called "other". The use of Arabic language is, in the first place, a decolonizing strategy against the hegemony of western languages. Nonetheless, Arab literature needs to be transmitted to the western reader as to correct the forged image through translation which is described as the common language of languages (Dyssou). It is a common language because all people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds can meet or transfer messages. Ngugi wa Thiong'o considers translation as one of the powerful strategies to decolonize African literatures from western influence. wa Thiong'o claims:

The center ... envisions conversation among languages, culture and disciplines as key in the emerging multicultural global community... it hopes to reflect a global vision, provide a sound intellectual grounding for that vision, stimulate writing and publishing in marginalized languages and promote translation as a means of giving visibility to genius from even the most marginalized (Wa thing'o 371).

Tejaswini Niranjana, an Indian professor, cultural theorist, translator and author, directs her attention in *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism and the Colonial Context* (1992) to the notion of representation through retranslating history and celebrating precolonial legacy:

The post-colonial desire to re-translate is linked to the desire to re-write history. Re-writing is based on an act of reading, for translation in the post-colonial context involves what Benjamin would call "citation" and not an "absolute forgetting." Hence there is no simple rupture with the past but a radical rewriting of it. To read existing translations against the grain is also to read colonial historiography from a post-colonial perspective, and a critic alert to the ruses of colonial discourse can help uncover what Walter Benjamin

calls "the second tradition," the history of resistance (Niranjana 172).

In this historical practice of translation, Niranjana urges postcolonial cultures to consider translation as a site for resistance and conversion. In her postcolonial perspective, Niranjana follows Walter Benjamin's point of view to show that translation has long been a site for fabricated western translations and considers translation as rereading/rewriting history (Douglas 92). Accordingly, she suggests a transformative practice of 'retranslation' that seeks to generate a harmonious cultural integrity that was totally destroyed by the colonizers. Then, Niranjana claims: "The state of emergency/emergence that is the post-colonial condition demands a disruptive concept of history that... will also contribute to formulating a notion of representation/translation to account for the discrepant identities of the post-colonial 'subject'(Niranjana 168).

Niranjana believes that in order to dismantle the surviving traces of colonialism, the post colonized people must recover their precolonial heritage. This includes the reexamination of liberal nationalism as well as the nostalgia for lost origins that was destroyed by the colonizers, neither of which provides models of interventionist practice or " grounds" for ideological production that challenges hegemonic interpretation of history (167). This radical retranslation based on native subjectivity is, for the postcolonial theorist, a channel of resistance to colonial power as Niranjana states:

Non-Western peoples attain to maturity and subject-hood only after a period of apprentice- ship in which they learn European languages and thereby gain a "voice." Inserting the encounter with the language of the colonizer into universal history permits Trevelyan to imply that a knowledge of this history promotes the widespread use of English. The order of mimesis presiding over the notion of translation that enables Trevelyan's text helps domesticate the colonized and repress their heterogeneity by dismissing it as "fantastic" and "barbaric." (...) -evoked by such proper names as William Jones, William Ward, and James Mill-which provides a matrix for the "experience" of nineteenth-century colonialists,

and allows translation to function as translation- into-history  
(164-165).

Forty-Two Years after its publication, *Orientalism* still offers a vivid depiction of what is happening nowadays. Orientalist propaganda still standing against everything related to Islam and Arabism in general. The image of the Palestinian cause in the West cannot be analyzed in isolation from the analysis of the image they have about Islam and Muslims. Zionists rely on an orientalist mechanism of opinion making within Western society towards the Palestinian issue. They do not hesitate to falsify facts and images of the conflict in order to justify the Israeli war. This is preconditioned by the fact that, the west is not committed to neutrality and objectivity with regard to the Palestinian cause; rather, it takes a hostile stance when it comes to their right in Palestine. Palestinians and the resistance movements are often portrayed as antagonist extremist Islamic movements.

A story of exile and diaspora, *Returning to Haifa* by Palestinian author Ghassan Kanafani was published in 1969 and translated into English by Barbara Harlow and Karen Riley in 2000. The novella has increased the world's awareness of the Palestinian cause and of their forced displacement from their lands. It refutes the notion that the Palestinians are terrorists as they are portrayed in the Western media. The power of translation is shown in the influence of the story not only on the Arab reader but also on the Western one as it is indicated by their translators. Riley and Harlow describe the novella as "a text that appeals not to the Palestinian and larger Arab community, but also interests a more diverse university – educated community, including many (western) Jews though the author himself saw his work as "resistance writing"( Singer).

"History is Written by Winners"; this proverb implies that history is not grounded in realities; rather it is the conquerors who document and interpret facts the way they want in which they often imposed their narrative down on the world. In *Returning to Haifa*, the history is written by Holocaust survivors; Iphrat Koshen and his wife Miriam who according to their tale, a five-month old baby; Dov (Khaldun) is left behind by his parents who fled during the war. Their story lasted for twenty years till the Palestinian parents return to Haifa in 1967 in search of the house and the

baby that they were forced to abandon during mass evictions by Israeli forces. As Kanafani narrates:

Said looked at Miriam, and said to her slowly:

“He asks how a father and mother could leave their infant child and run off. Madame, you did not tell him the truth. And when you did tell him, it was too late. Are we the ones who left him? Are we the ones who killed that child near Bethlehem Church in Hadar? The child whose body, so you said, was the first thing that shocked you in this world that wipes out justice with baseness every day? Maybe that child was Khaldun! Maybe the small thing that died that wretched day was Khaldun. Yes, it was Khaldun. You lied to us. It was Khaldun. He died. This young man is none other than an orphan child you found in Poland or England” (Kanafani 183).

Therefore, the book is considered as a documentation of the events that took place in 1948 when the city of Haifa was occupied. The book is an influential transfer of the Palestinian narrative from narrated to documented because previously the Palestinian dilemma was not fully documented and unfortunately, Israeli literature covers the whole scene. In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Edward Said states the role of Arab writers after the Nekba:

The role of any writer who considered himself seriously engaged in the actuality of his time—and few writers during the period since 1948 considered themselves otherwise engaged—was, first of all, as a producer of thought and language whose radical intention was to guarantee survival to what was in imminent danger of extinction (Said 69).

The novella creates feelings of compassion and understanding toward Palestinians all over the world especially as the author make an implicit call for a peaceful coexistence between Jews and Palestinians when he differentiates between Zionists and Jewish people as two different sects. This same idea is adopted by many writers as Edward Said confesses:

I have spent a great deal of my life during the past thirty-five years advocating the rights of the Palestinian people to national self-determination, but I have always tried to do that with full attention paid to the reality of the Jewish people and what they suffered by the way of persecution and genocide. The paramount thing is that the struggle for equality in Palestine/Israel should be directed toward a humane goal, that is, coexistence, and not further suppression and denial. Not accidentally, I indicate that Orientalism and modern anti-Semitism have common roots. Therefore, it would seem to be a vital necessity for independent intellectuals always to provide alternative models to the reductively simplifying and confining ones, based on mutual hostility, that have prevailed in the Middle East and elsewhere for so long (Said ).

Through providing such positive Jewish representation, Kanafani shifted the focus of the reader from Palestinian / Jewish dispute to a more humanitarian cause against some Western political agendas that serves Zionism. This call of the coexistence between Palestinians and Jews gives a truthful image of the Palestinians as victims of the Zionist government that aggressively and illegally took their land.

### **Conclusion**

The self-representation/-translation if not used by Arabs/Muslims themselves as primary defensive strategy toward orientalist stereotypes; it would be used as hegemonic weapon against them. Translation plays a significant role in the dialectic discourse between the Orient and the West. As a dynamic cultural tool, translation is often used as a means of cultural and linguistic dominance of the subordinate culture (The Orient) through translating texts the way orientalists want or by choosing the works that only fit their orientalist project. Therefore, from a postcolonial perspective, Arab writers need to pay more attention to the pivot role that translation plays in their resistance of the Western Orientalism and helps to make change and reshape the falsified ideas that the West reader has about Arabs and Muslims.

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