CULTURE AND THE PROBLEMATICS OF ARABIC TRANSLATION

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Introduction

The immediate and obvious term to describe the position Arab culture occupies in today's world is marginality. This marginality is the direct consequence or at least the reflection of the Arab political position on the present international scene. In this century, Arab contribution to contemporary human culture has been minimal; what counts as real Arab contributions date back centuries when the Arab-Islamic empire was at its zenith.

But it is always difficult, if not impossible, to measure cultural contributions in the same way as economic ones. It is, then, appropriate to state at the outset that when discussing an issue such as Arab culture and the practice of translation into Arabic, one cannot escape over-generalizations based on the trends that govern contemporary Arab culture. In this respect two remarks are in order: the difficulty of defining the semantics of human culture, on the one hand; and, on the other, the cultural hegemony of the colonial West, which over the past few centuries managed in different shapes and forms to subjugate particularly the peoples of Africa and Asia. In the Arab World, at least, the expressions *global culture* and *human culture* have become synonymous with Western culture, for what this culture does not reach or endorse remains excluded behind the boundaries of restricted nationalism and regionalism.

One must, however, accept the limitation of Arab contributions to contemporary human culture. Non-Western nations, including Arab ones, relentlessly pursue the culture of the superior and adopt many of its aspects. In return, the dominant West never hesitates to spread its culture which it sees as a natural extension of its political and military hegemony. The supremacy of the

West does not, however, legitimize the inertia of modern Arab culture which has focused in the main on poetry, novels, theatre, and the like. It ignores or avoids the fact that human knowledge transcends these areas which are, nevertheless, important in themselves. Likewise modern Arab translation has also been limited generally to literary genres.

Despite this gloomy state of modern, contemporary Arab culture, the fact remains that it is impossible to obliterate or exclude any human group from history. Even for communities which are technically no longer contributors to humanity, it is difficult to deny the existence of their culture whether extinct or on its way to extinction. A case in point are the ancient peoples who inhabited the Sahara for centuries until the Romans defeated them: little or nothing of their existence remains. But their culture continued to live in the legends of the desert, in many Saharan traditions and in a number of archaeological ruins in areas in the Libyan valley of *alajal*. The same applies to the American-Indians who were subjected to methodical and calculated eradication by the West, but whose culture remains a major part of American and human civilization.

The existence of an Arab culture and its contributions to humanity is, therefore, a grounded in fact. But it should be pointed out that what is human, at least theoretically, encompasses and, at the same time, transcends the Western. The same also applies to the Arabs, and their culture past and present, even though the present is not as effective and influential as the past. Present Arab culture should and ought to reach out to its past with a view to learning and inspiration, otherwise Arab culture will remain passive: others, Westerners in the main, want to know about it simply because it is a material *bit* of the world. Sadly this is the case. Arab culture has been accessed by others mainly through translation; and others, when possessing virtue and impartiality, can produce *faithful* representations of this culture. Arabs themselves, individuals, institutions and governments, should actively endeavour to redress the imbalances and misrepresentations of Arab culture by others.

Translation and contemporary Arab culture

Translation has, albeit sporadically, played an important role in the formulation of foundations and systems which have gradually become integral components of modern Arab culture. A closed culture which does not interact with others is doomed. Arab culture, through its long history, has been open onto other cultures: contributions to it are historically documented. The contributions of Salman al-Farisi, the first Persian convert to Islam and one of the companions of the Prophet Mohammad, for example, in laying the foundations of early Islamic

polity, cannot be undermined. The fact that Salman was a typical product of his Persian culture, with its Asian roots including Chinese and Hindi, on the one hand, and the fact that he was a gnostic personality on the other, contributed to the emergence of important ideologies, particularly Islamic mysticism which many an Islamic sect adopted.[1] Other examples of figures who contributed to the development of Arab culture include such prominent non-Arab scholars as al-Jahiz, al-Farabi, al-Baironi, Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and al-Gazali. Extolling the contributions of these figures and others to Arab culture does not belittle in any way what can be termed 'pure Arab' contributions.

The Arabs saw and still see translation not as intrusiveness on other cultures, but rather as a continuation of the original, although in a different culture. This view is not exclusive to Arabs. It is generally argued, for example, that 'French philosophy can be read as a translation of German thought;' an expression very reminiscent of the description of the relationship between Arab-Islamic scholarship and the Greek culture. But such an attitude adversely relegates translation to a secondary status. The very expression can be rather translated as 'German thought only lives within and through French translations'. This dialectic gives translation a nobler position and makes it a process that breathes life into texts by transforming them from one culture into another.'[2]

This brief account of the contributions of other cultures to the development of Arab culture primarily through translation is significant for it reiterates the following three points:

(1) Faith is, first and foremost, a cultural and epistemic process. A child inherits its parents' psychological and genetic qualities, but absorbs faith from the information provided by the parents and the environment, and which the child comes to perceive as a reality that makes a human being an individual. Deviant or opposing information fed to the child may result in a radical change in the mainstream set of beliefs, or at least alter them. Although this example is obvious, it is useful in explaining the influence of other cultures on the culture of Arabs, in general, and on the Muslim one, in particular.

Arab culture has had diverse backgrounds rooted in both Asia and the West. The immediate geography of early Islam included both Christianity and Judaism to which Islam was complementary. Later, Asian cultures became influential in Arab-Islamic culture through translation carried out by great Asian scholars. This culminated in the emergence of sofism and

mysticism within Islamic theology. Furthermore, at the time of the rise of Islam, Christianity was not confined to the East, its cradle, but had been shaped by numerous Western cultures particularly after it was adopted as the official religion of the Roman empire in both Western and Byzantine flanks.

The *shu'uubiya* (a primarily Persian movement) tried to deprive the Arabs during the early periods of the Abbasid rule of their racial pride and superiority, by arguing that Islam was a divine product and, by the same token, everything pertaining to it had to be referred back to the divine source. These arguments were postulated to justify the phenomenal demise of the Persian empire which, unless there was a divine will, would not have happened, particularly at the hands of the Bedouin Arabs. Likewise, some Muslim extremist groups exaggerated Arab infallibility in both culture and faith, and belittled the contributions of others to the Arab-Islamic culture. The history of the Arab-Islamic nations, however, shows the opposite. One cannot envisage such cross-fertilization between Arab and other cultures but as the result of translation, even if the purpose is to learn about an enemy. Translation is, therefore, a good example of intercultural exchange between Arabs and others since the early Omayyads onto the modern time.

(2) Arab culture had certainly been affected by other cultures to the extent that it became almost impossible to distinguish between what was purely Arab and what was not. Despite the awareness of the Arabs of the origins of some translated works, they became so deeply rooted in the psyche of the Arabs that they became known as Arabic works rather than translations.

(3) Awareness of the past is mandatory, particularly if its contributions to the present are distinct and abundant. This particularly applies to the case of Arabic, for past translations-cum-Arab works still form an important role in modern Arab cultural life. Most conservative Muslim groups argue for a return to the practices of the *salaf SaaliH* (a term used to refer mainly to the early generations of Muslims). They judge and often condemn the present and the future through the eyes of this past. The past is clearly dear to the Arabs, and has a lot to offer, particularly from the practice of medieval Arab translation, on the proviso that the past does not become a hindrance to progress.

Arabic translation today

To demarcate the situation of translation into Arabic at the end of this century would be a difficult task, further complicated because of the expansion of scholarship and publication and in their accompanying technologies. Unfortunately, translation into Arabic has not managed to keep up with this expansion. But again, and without being able to avoid generalizations, one could draw attention to the following points:

(1) There is a collective desire and considerable interest by Arabs to know about other cultures through their intellectual productivity in different media.

(2) A growing trend to translate not only what the West produces but also other cultures has been gathering momentum in the Arab World.

(3) Accordingly, a number of regional and pan-Arab organizations has been established, such as the Arab League's Translation Co-ordination Centre in Damascus, Syria, and the National Council for Culture and Art in Kuwait. The latter publishes *majallat al-'uluum* (Science Magazine) a bi-monthly magazine devoted to translating science and technology into Arabic and based exclusively on articles published in the American *Science* magazine. Another example is *majallat al-'aadaab al-'aalamiyya* (World Literatures Magazine), a seasonal magazine published by the Arab Writers Union in Damascus. To these one may add the periodicals and magazines published in Arabic by non-Arab countries: the former Soviet Union, China, USA, Germany, and others.

(4) The expansion of translation into Arabic is not only measured in terms of the number of 'specialized' periodicals but also in terms of translated books, the diversity of translation sources and resources, and often the publication of more than one translation of the same work into Arabic. A good example of the growing ratio of translations into Arabic is *'aalam al-ma'rifa* (The World of Knowledge) published by the National Council for Culture and Art in Kuwait since 1978. Unlike many publications in the Arab World, *'aalam al-ma'rifa* has appeared regularly since its inception and used to sell 50000 copies per issue then 40000 since 1991. Its cheap price has made it widely available to Arab readers. Up to 1994 it published

182 books of which 59 were translations. In the following two years it published 14 translations out of 30 titles.

(5) Lastly, the investigation of the relationship between culture and translation rests above all on the fact that translating a work means producing a new text in Arabic. This in turn contributes to the quantitative intellectual activity in Arabic regardless of the qualitative aspects of these texts. The importance of this point lies in the fact that any given translation becomes a constitutive component of the host culture. The abundance of foreign programmes shown on Arab TV stations is a good example. Despite the apparent differences between translated books and articles and TV programmes, subtitled, dubbed or otherwise, and the awareness of Arab audiences of such differences, no TV programme exists without a text: a script. In addition to translations 'proper,' TV programmes further add to the cultural market of the Arab World. Even those *cheap* foreign programmes, scorned and despised by Arab viewers, contribute nevertheless to a particular culture. What further justifies the classification of translations as new texts in Arabic is the fact that the great majority of Arab readers either prefer to read in Arabic or are simply monolinguals; what is more, readers find it easy to identify with texts available in their own language.

Problematics of translation into Arabic

Texts are at the heart of the problematics of translation into Arabic. Once it is translated, the foreign text becomes part of the indigenous Arab culture. Although some problems go beyond the choice of texts for translation, they become accentuated after the translation, and all this can be subsumed under the politics and economics of translation in the Arab World.

The individualist characterization of Arabic translation

The history of the Arabic translation tradition has almost always been characterized by the work of individuals, either the translators themselves or the ones who commission translations. The efforts of these individuals have together yielded considerable results, but these efforts cannot achieve the same outcome as the collective ones. When translation into Arabic is considered as a cultural enterprise, individual efforts cannot produce the required results. Translation, after all, is a series of activities starting with the choice of the work for translation, researching its status within its language and culture, the translation process,

revisions, etc. The existence of organized translation teams or reputable agencies seems to be the obvious answer to the dire present situation of translation into Arabic.

The lack of clear criteria for the selection of texts

Often a publishing house or an agency commissions a certain writer and/or translator to render a work which it deems worthy in itself or for the prospects of its economic potential. This is the exception rather than the norm in the Arab World, however. Usually translators, regardless of their competence, choose texts they read, and often these translators are students who completed postgraduate studies particularly in the West or other regions of the developed world. They normally translate texts which they studied for a number of years and which they know they would be able to force their future Arab students to purchase, for these texts would be vital references for the *poor* students' university courses.

The lack of monitoring bodies of international scholarship

The monitoring of international scholarship in the Arab World is at best left to coincidence. Translation-worthy works are only known to Arab readers if an individual publicises them, translates or criticises them. But, to reiterate the point, individuals cannot cover all fields of scholarship particularly in an age of continuously rapid technology, not to mention the translators' own idiosyncrasies and political orientation which ultimately remain individualist in terms of what gets translated into Arabic and represent an added censorship on Arab readers.

Certainly, within what is currently termed the *global village*, the various communication media can in theory draw attention to up-to-date scholarship and publications in the *village*, but the reliability of such media is questionable. To reach wider audiences, such media are primarily concerned with superficial cultural activity, and are therefore not easily interested in serious works which are not normally economically viable. One can thus discern that the ideal strategy of text selection should be the remit of specialized and reputable agencies. Despite their scarcity, such agencies exist in Arab countries such as Syria and Kuwait, but they remain deviations from the prevailing norm in the Arab world.

Refraining from translating old texts

Despite the growing activity of translation into Arabic, works perceived as old are not generally deemed worthy of translation. Examples include the German philosopher Hegel's *Logic*, which influenced Western philosophy, and which has not been translated into Arabic; James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, the largest

collection of human mythology, of which only one chapter has been translated into Arabic; while for years there have been attempts to translate Indian mythology into Arabic but this project is yet to see light. Of course there could be, and certainly are, political reasons behind the decisions to translate or not to translate particular old works into Arabic.

Hindering bureaucracy

To keep abreast of international scholarship, the Kuwaiti series '*aalam alma'rifa* and *ath-thaqaafa al-'aalamiya*, for example, require that any texts proposed for translation should not be more than two years old. Had this been the norm, it would be ideal, but reality is something else. Proposing a work less than two years old for translation normally requires the proposer to go through painfully slow bureaucratic procedures that can take up to two years on average. If we add the time taken by these procedures to the age of the proposed work, then the translation would appear some four or more years later despite the stated claims of the publishers.

Other publishers do not impose the same rules concerning the age of the work for translation, but their formalities are likewise time consuming and frustrating. There are of course exceptions to this suffocating bureaucracy and that is when Arab publishers feel that a particular translation would be economically viable to them. In such cases the translation process progresses smoothly and rapidly and the translator or translators receive all the necessary assistance. Translations of the writings of the Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marques are a case in point. Lebanese publishers, in particular, raced to publish often thrown-together translations of his works in the wake of the huge economic profits from the translation of his *One Hundred Years of Solitude* into Arabic.[3]

The low economic returns of translation

A translator's earnings are generally less than those of an author of a work in Arabic. Bearing in mind the fact that profitability of books both in the Arab World and internationally has declined in recent years, translators into Arabic, and often authors, do not receive the royalties they deserve. Worse, an unknown translator or author would pay the publishers who claim they would risk their reputation by publishing such a work. For the meagre returns, selected works for translation into Arabic are generally less demanding such as a chapter in a book or an article in a journal which can be rendered quickly, and often if not always parts of and/or explanations contained in the source text are deleted by *microwave* translators who probably, and apparently rightly, believe that the returns are not

compatible with the efforts and time *proper* renderings require. All this negatively affects the quality of translations into Arabic, and by extension Arab readers' judgement of the source work.

Inexperienced and/or non-specialist translators

Translating humanities is, in many cases, carried out by translators who are not usually familiar with the subjects. These translators are usually ignorant of the basics of the subject matter as well as the methods and techniques of translation, and consequently misunderstandings of the sources appear as inaccuracies in their translations. Khalil Motran's translations of Shakespeare's works are cases in point. Motran renders theatrical technical jargon literally leading therefore to terms and scattered expressions in Arabic with different meanings from the original: he calls, for example, one side of the theatre *ar-rawD* (the garden) and the other *al-baaHa* (the plaza).

Translation is a rewriting of an original in the target language and culture. A requirement for this task is the need for translators who are equally competent in both languages and ultimately cultures. But the practice in the Arab World is far from satisfactory. Many uncondonable errors in the representation of Arab and foreign names occur in the Arabic translation of *Readers Guide to International Literature*.[4] The translation was published a year behind schedule to allow for the rectification of mistakes. When it appeared, under pressure from the publisher, the translation still suffered from many imperfections: the corrections necessitated many deletions and further financial loss to the publisher. Other erroneous representations of the names of Arab figures appear in a translation of a work on Soviet and Arabic literatures. The translator, it seems, would not bother himself to check the Arabic names but merely transliterated in Arabic the Russian realizations.[5]

Especially in the absence of reputable and responsible monitoring institutions, some translators into Arabic think that being able to speak a language and understand simplified versions of its written mode qualify them to translate work from and into it. To worsen matters, these translators may have received some of their education where the language is spoken, and their education certificates are assumed by many publishers, particularly small ones, to be sufficient qualification to carry out translation. But there is a huge gulf between academic degrees and the knowledge as well as the linguistic competence required in good translators. Examples include Syrians who spent a few years studying in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Germany only to embark, on their return, on producing embarrassingly inadequate translations into Arabic. This is not meant

as an attack on any specific education system; nor is it meant to suggest that some people be prevented from translating. It merely states the fact that many translations into Arabic by some so-called translators reveal a dire lack of the required knowledge and linguistic competence. This does not do justice to the real translators or to the source texts.

Poor command of Arabic is the most pervasive of all problems. All too often most translators find it hard to write acceptable Arabic particularly for texts that require considerable processing efforts in their source language in the first place. In most cases poor translations are the result of the translators' lack of good grounding in the Arabic language; their translations often force Arab readers to condemn good foreign works into the bad category primarily because of bad Arabic translations.

Translations are rarely checked against the originals

Both public and private publishers in the Arab World do not usually employ specialists in the source languages to revise translations into Arabic; most see extra costs in employing such experts, and instead put all their faith and trust in the translator. Further, translations make their way to the market only after having been approved by officials whose primary concern is whether the Arabic translation is compatible with the 'regulations' of the state.

The existence of more than one translation of the same work

This could be healthy if the later translations are complementary to or corrective of the former. The problem in the Arab World is that repeated translations attain neither of these objectives. Rather, the poor Arab reader, with access only to Arabic, would be confused and would understandably resort to judging translations on the basis of the status of the translator(s) whether established or not. But this is not always easy for the Arab reader, particularly when translations of the same work appear in different Arab countries. Earnest Fischer's *The Necessity of Art* appeared simultaneously in both Cairo and Beirut in two slightly different Arabic versions; and when Marxism was the vogue, two translations of the same book were published by two publishers under the titles *haakadha takallama marx Haqqan* (this is how Marx spoke truly) and *marx al-Haqiiqii* (the true Marx).[6] It is obvious that financial gain was the driving force which is clearly a waste of human and financial resources in the Arab world. It is a further example of the lack of co-ordination and co-operation in translation both on national and pan-Arab levels. On occasions, a newcomer to translation would change the title and make minor alterations to an existing translation and claim this

blatant act of plagiarism to be a new translation. Mish'al Suleiman's distinguished translation of *The Necessity of Art*, appeared, to the surprise of Arab readers, with slight changes but in a bright eye-catching cover and the title of *al'ishtiraakiyya wa l-fan* (socialism and art) instead of Mish'al Suleiman's original title *Daruuratu l-fan* (the necessity of Art).[7]

The translation of terminology

The theme of a recent conference on literary criticism held in Jordan was the translation of terms into Arabic, their spread, the lack of consensus and the indifference towards the use of the same term to denote various meanings or different terms to mean the same concept. The reason behind this terminological confusion in Arabic is that terms used in literary criticism, in particular, and the humanities, in general, are taken from more than one foreign language which translators relay into Arabic often according to personal judgement. To the detriment of a unified term in Arabic, these translators often vehemently defend their choices, which ultimately adds to the existing confusion.

When translating the same term into Arabic from a number of foreign languages with their respective morphological, syntactic and semantic systems, it generally becomes a matter of either transliterating it, deforming therefore the source language, or finding an Arabic term that is equivalently compatible with the original, which is a rare option. Leaving any implications about the status of loan terms in Arabic aside, the need for the standardization of terminology in the Arab world is urgent so that our children could at least, and at last, speak the same language.

Censorship of works that criticise Islam and the Arabs, and scarce translation of Israeli writings

Ideally a translation should retain all that the original contains, even if it apparently offends the target culture. After all, blame should be put on the original work not the translation. But why should we translate what vilifies us in the first place? The obvious answer should be that we need to know how the other, friend or foe, represents us. I would, however, hasten to add that some uninformed misrepresentations of Arab cultural tradition and heritage only serve to indicate the extremism, and probably the racism, of the author or authors of the original works. Nevertheless, any author has the right to express views which should be translated in their entirety rather than in managed translations.

In his translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which relegates many sacred Arab and Islamic values and symbols in the lowest parts of hell, Taha Fawzi, for

example, deletes all that is insulting to Islam.[8] Further, he fails to point out the deletions, fearing the contradiction readers may perceive in his praise of Dante's genius set against his representation of Islam and Muslims in the *Comedy*. Another example is the translator of Brookelman's *The History of Arabic Literature* who added a three-page note to explain why the German orientalist asserted a resemblance between the short Maccan Suras (the chapters of the Quran revealed unto the Prophet in the city of Macca) and the rhyming speech of fortune tellers during the *Jaahiliyya* (the term used to designate the pre-Islamic period).[9] One might wonder, therefore, what gives the translator the right to protect Arab readers who are perceived as unable to handle any vilification of their culture and/or religion and who therefore need to be protected.

Arab boycott of Israel has not only covered goods but also Israeli scholarship. Regardless of the conflict that has raged between the Arabs and Israel for over fifty years, a logical mind would assume that antagonists would be better to learn about each other: past, present, problems and aspirations. Israelis have translated from Arabic, but the Arabs have refrained from doing so. In Egypt, there are already some Arabic translations of Israeli writings, in the wake of the Camp David accord between the two countries, but these translations remain orchestrated and not representative of the literary and scientific activities in Israel.

Translating translations and the hegemony of English and French on Arabic

Although the concept of internationalism, in theory, transcends Western boundaries, and although the cultural turn of contemporary translation studies has shifted attention towards many other cultures, English and, to a lesser degree, French continue to be the main donor languages for translation into Arabic. This is not confined to what is originally produced in these two languages, but also translations relayed through them as in the case of Spanish and Russian, of which there are more native speakers than those of English or French. Though it is desirable and fruitful to relay English or French translations of texts from Japanese and other African languages, for there are few or no Arabs who command them, the hegemony of English and French is prevalent even with regard to languages such as Spanish and Russian spoken by many Arabs. The writings of the two prominent Russian writers Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, as well as those of Garcia Marques, were translated from French and not directly from respectively Russian and Spanish. This situation also, unfortunately, applies to translation from Arabic into languages other than English or French, for such translations are relayed via the two languages, leading to accentuated degrees of loss.

The limited contact between contemporary Arab culture and other

communities in the world continues because the English or French intermediary does not give prominence to such cultures in the first place. One rarely finds Arabic translations from Italian or Greek, translations from Chinese are mostly carried out usually by the Chinese themselves for propaganda purposes, translations of Argentinean or Brazilian writings are almost non-existent; and the translations of the poetry of the Chilean Pablo Niroda were done on the basis that it was the poetry of a communist poet and not as an example of Chilean or South American literature.

Conclusion

This article has identified the important ailments in contemporary Arabic translation and in the accompanying culture in which it languishes. But even if translation manages to overcome its problems, it cannot, on its own, serve as the panacea for Arab cultural inertia, particularly at a time when reading is losing ground to electronic technologies, themselves dominated by English, which further relegates Arabic as it finds it still difficult to keep up with the continuous revolution in information technology.

Despite this bleak picture of Arab culture and translation into Arabic, the fact remains that the number of Arabs able to read Arabic and other languages, particularly English and French, has grown considerably over the last few decades. It is through translation that they could disseminate what others have to offer and it is their most certain means of appropriate trans-cultural exchange.

Not long ago, when the West embarked on its renaissance, the majority of Arabic works and, by extension all pre-Arab cultures, were translated into European national languages. This is because translation was and remains a vital basis for national revival and, as in the past, it has the potential, if properly organized and supported, to assist in the Arab dream of development.

Notes

1. *aS-SaHraa` l-kubraa fii Daw'i t-taariikh* (The Great Sahara in History) Hans Vays, trans. Imad Eddin Ghanim, 1979, Tripoli, Libya.

2. *shahkSiyyaat ghayr qaliqa fi l'islaam* (Stable Figures in Islam), Hadi Al-Alawi, (1995), Beirut.

3. at-tarjama wa l-muthaaqafa (Translation and acculturation), Ben

Abdel-Aali (1989) *al-WaHda*, vols. 61 & 62.

4. Translated from French by Sami Al-Jundi & Inaam Al-Jundi and reprinted more than 20 times in Beirut.

5. Translated by Mohamad al-Jura and published in Beirut.

6. The book is based on a PhD thesis from a Soviet university and the translation was published by the author himself. [The text mentions two books but here only a thesis is mentioned. Something needs clarification. Again, it might be better to change the article/chapter to one with name/ title in text and a regular references section.]]

7. Appeared in Beirut (1980) with Asad Haleem as the translator.

8. *Dante and The Divine Comedy*, translated by Taha Fawzi (1965) and published in Cairo.

9. Translated by Abdelhaleem Najjar (1968) and published by the cultural division of the League of Arab States.