

Translation between Faithfulness and Distortion: The Reality of Translating Arabic Literature in the Shadow of the Dominance of Globalized Discourse

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Abstract

In the era of globalization, translation is regarded as an influential and persuasive instrument, mainly for national literatures that aim to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries and Arabic literature with its translations into international languages is no exception. This paper seeks to examine the association between globalization and translation, as well as to explore the influence of globalization on the transmission of Arabic literature into other languages vis-à-vis its content, style, and reception. Despite the increasing number of translations, the challenge of representing Arabic literature in foreign languages still poses several inquiries; How do the cultural and political dynamics of globalization influence the selection of works to be translated? Are there compulsory criteria to meet global preferences? To what degree does translation authentically preserve the identity of the Arab social Reality particularly, works connected to women, religion, and civil conflicts? Hence, the study employs postcolonial theory and cultural translation theory as frameworks to examine the different dynamics controlling the translation process in selected literary works. The paper reveals that translation can strip a text of its cultural background and linguistic nuances in order to internationalize its interpretation. Thus, this paper underscores that translation in the current globalized framework is a double-edged sword; it can function as an instrument for promoting worldwide national understanding or as an apparatus for propagating prejudiced notions. The study, therefore, suggests that Arab translators have to play a more active role in determining which works are to be translated and how they are transferred into other languages.

Keywords: Arabic literature, Dynamics, Globalization, Postcolonial theory, Translation

Introduction

Following the events of September 11, the West initiated a vigorous campaign against Islam and Arab identity. Arabs were portrayed as either terrorists or uneducated, primitive individuals. Furthermore, Islam was depicted as a faith associated with violence, extremism, and oppression. This portrayal closely resembles the one historically presented by Orientalists, who consistently link the Islamic East with violence and bloodshed. Edward Said characterizes

the Orientalist depiction of Arabs as "camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization" (Said 108).

This distorted representation, compounded by the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), has fostered an increasing climate of Islamophobia and Arabophobia, reinforcing the stereotype of Arabs as terrorists, killers, and misogynists (Sadek). Consequently, the Orient and Arabs must strive to counteract this image primarily through the translation of their authentic social realities as a strategy against Orientalism. Douglas Robinson posits that the narratives of colonized peoples can be 'cited,' 'translated,' or 'reread/rewritten' by colonizers in ways that recontextualize the colonized culture to serve the interests of colonial domination, as well as by postcolonial theorists who can employ the same methods to decolonize their individual and collective consciousness (93). Thus, translation can serve as a tool for resisting or redirecting colonial or postcolonial influences. In this essay, I will examine how translation operates in the literary sphere both as a means for perpetuating orientalist propaganda and as a form of resistance to hegemonic ideologies, focusing on two translated Arab works: *Chicago* by Alaa Al Aswany and *Returning to Haifa* by Ghasan Kanafani.

1. Orientalism and Ideological Translation

Translation is frequently viewed as a source of power and control. The manipulative influence of translation is particularly pronounced within the orientalist discourse, where it often serves as a cultural hegemonic tool for certain Western nations. Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere contend that translations are not produced in isolation and that translators operate within a specific culture at a particular time. Consequently, it is evident that dominant cultures typically select specific works that align with their imperialistic agendas, reinforcing existing stereotypes. Bassnett and Lefevere also suggest that a translator's self-perception and

understanding of their culture can significantly impact their translation choices (Bassnett and Lefevere).

Western publishers frequently wield a manipulative cultural and economic authority over translations from African, Asian, and South American literatures, founded on ethnocentric and imperialist principles (Venuti 167). In his analysis titled *Translation and Cultural Hegemony: The Case of French-Arabic Translation*, Richard Jacquemond elucidated the disparities in translation between subordinate subaltern cultures and dominant ones. Jacquemond argues that hegemonic cultures are inclined to translate only those works by authors from dominated cultures that conform to their preconceived ideas of the latter, and that authors in marginalized cultures seeking a broader audience will often tailor their writing to the expectations of translation into a dominant language, which necessitates some level of adherence to existing stereotypes (Jacquemond 139-158). Lawrence Venuti also disputes the idea of translation as neutral, emphasizing its hegemonic role. He claims that "The translation enacts a process of identity formation in which the colonizer and colonized, transnational corporations and indigenous consumers, are positioned unequally" (Venuti 165).

The manipulative nature of translation is evident in various Arab texts, where certain Arab authors mirror the same orientalist perspectives historically adopted by the West. Consequently, specific Arab writings that align with the orientalist agenda are frequently selected for translation by Western publishers.

For an extended period, numerous representations of terrorism, violence, and oppression have been linked to Arabs and Islam. This correlation arises from Western Orientalism, which depicts both male and female Muslims in ways that incite revulsion and animosity toward them; Islamic culture is often characterized by malevolence, sexual excess, and primitiveness. Orientalists have portrayed Arab men as brutal, authoritative, and abusive, while women are often reduced to commodities for men's pleasure and satisfaction.

Since images have long been recognized as effective tools for influencing the audience's emotions and perceptions, as the saying goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words." To this end, orientalist discourse produced a series of postcards linking the Orient with rampant sexuality. Works depicting harems and seraglios, for instance, exemplify the Western assumptions about Eastern women and their portrayal. These artworks have reinforced stereotypes that cast oriental women as mere sexual objects. Artists such as Eugène Delacroix, Le Corbusier, Charles Édouard Jeanneret Gris, and Jean Geiser Vintage have created sketches of Algerian women in their art. According to Malek Alloula, these images do not accurately portray the Algerian woman but reflect a Western fantasy that seeks to unveil her. Alloula argues that both pictorial and literary forms of Orientalism have contributed to the construction of an idealized fantasy in which the West has indulged for over four centuries.

Thus, the West persistently produces skewed and prejudiced representations of Arabs and Muslims broadly, and Arab women specifically, consistently portraying them through stereotypical lenses that emphasize submission, passivity, illiteracy, and subservience to men and society. This perspective overlooks the achievements of Arab women across various sectors. Regrettably, some Arab authors perpetuate this narrative in their writings. Numerous Arab literary works depict Arab women similarly to how orientalists have portrayed them, as oppressed, marginalized individuals subject to sexual dominance and exploitation, ultimately distorting the representation of the "self" in their literature. This parallel illustrates the profound impact of the negative imagery propagated by Western writings and media through their alarming propaganda.

2. Translation as a counter-orientalist strategy

Translation serves not only to enrich the audience's understanding of the source culture but also extends its influence to social and political policies, thereby reinforcing its function in supporting certain ideologies that contribute to "perpetuating the unequal power relations among peoples, races, and languages" (Niranjana), particularly in the translation of works aligned with specific ideological viewpoints. As a result, the West continues to reinforce its perceptions of the Orient by translating works that further its historical orientalist ambitions. However, translation can also be viewed as a significant strategy actively employed in the process of decolonization. It functions within counter-orientalist discourse as the self (the Orient) is conveyed to the other (the West) in a more credible manner.

The Orient often assumes a stance of resistance against Western dominance. This may be due to its lack of political dominance and the needed media resources to effectively counter the barrage of orientalist misconceptions. Nevertheless, the limited political influence should not deter Eastern cultures from defending their identity against Western portrayals, echoing Karl Marx's assertion that the East is incapable of self-representation and requires an external representation. Thus, Arabs ought to reject the brutal and foreign associations that have been imposed on them for years. They need to engage in a counter-discourse to analyze how they are depicted in Western literature and in translated Arab texts, aiming to rectify the orientalist perceptions of themselves.

Translation serves as a crucial element in the continuous process of decolonization, as it encourages new regional and global understandings of the Orient and helps to redefine the image of the so-called "other." Primarily, the use of the Arabic language acts as a decolonizing strategy against the dominance of Western languages. However, it is important for Arab literature to reach Western audiences to amend the distorted representations through translation, which is often termed the "common language of languages" (Dyssou). This is considered a

common language because it enables communication and message exchange among people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Conclusion

If Arabs/Muslims do not employ self-representation/-translation as their main defensive strategy against orientalist stereotypes, it may be used as a tool of hegemony against them. Translation plays an essential role in the dynamic interaction between the Orient and the West. As a vibrant cultural instrument, translation can often facilitate the cultural and linguistic dominance of a subordinate culture (the Orient) by portraying texts in a manner preferred by orientalists or selecting works that align with their orientalist agenda. Hence, from a postcolonial standpoint, Arab writers should focus more on the critical role that translation occupies in their resistance to Western Orientalism, aiding in the transformation and redefinition of the misrepresented views that Western readers hold about Arabs and Muslims.

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