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Between the Harem and Feminism: The Translation and Circulation of Arab Women Novelists

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Abstract

This article critically examines the translation and circulation of literary works authored by Arab women novelists in the 1990s, a period marked by an unprecedented surge in the translation of Arabic-gendered fiction. Through the critiques of Michel Hartman and Marilyn Booth, it aims to shed light on the intricate interplay between translation and gender. Moreover, it probes how the translation and distribution of Arab women's fiction are entwined with the complex politics of Orientalism and frequently shaped by the dynamics of white Western feminism. The study explores the opportunities and challenges encountered by Arab women writers to gain international recognition and the extent to which translation can serve as a medium for their voices to resonate across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Central to the analysis is an exploration of power dynamics inherent in the selection, translation, and promotion of Arabic women writers, taking into account the influence of Western literary markets and feminist discourses. By scrutinizing the contributions of translators and publishers, the research underscores how feminist principles shape the visibility and reception of Arabic-gendered literature on a global scale.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the 1990s, a remarkable and unprecedented surge in the translation and publication of works by Arab women novelists brought about a transformative shift in the literary landscape. This era marked a significant turning point, as a multitude of Arab women's literary voices, previously overlooked and marginalized, were translated into English, reaching global audiences in ways previously unattainable. The translation list includes novels such as Leila Abouzeid's *Year of the Elephant* (1989), Hoda Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter* (1990), Liana Badr's *The Eye of the Mirror* (1995), Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot* (1995), and Hamida Na'na's *The Homeland* (1995).

This growing interest is illustrated by a telling anecdote by Peter Clark. In 1990, he approached his British publisher with a proposal to translate an anthology of short stories by the Syrian writer Abd al Salam al Ujaili. The publisher responded, "There are three things wrong about the idea. He's male. He's old. And he writes short stories. Can you find a young female novelist?" (Clark, 2000, p. 3) His response starkly illustrates the growing demand in the literary market for Arabic-gendered narratives.

For Clark, this response exemplifies the evolving dynamics shaping the publication of Arabic literature in the Western world. Literary works authored by women received increased attention in the Western context largely due to the prevalence of Orientalist fantasies about the Orient.

However, Farida Abu-Haidar, who wrote an introduction for Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot*, celebrated this translation shift to focusing on women writers. In her review of the translation of Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter*, Badr's *The Eye of the Mirror*, Bakr's *The Golden Chariot*, and Na'na's *The Homeland*, she states that the four novels "present poignantly realistic documents of the Arab world today." Despite the differences in plot and in "the political and personal conflicts running through the novels, there are other shared characteristics, despite the diversity of style and subject matter. An exploration of social relations, a probing for self-knowledge, and a desire to challenge the conventions of patriarchy seem to be the central themes in these works." Abu-Haidar recommended the novels for their use of a language that oscillates between classical Arabic and local vernacular, which allowed them to "succeed in articulating Arab women's experience" in such a way that "No reader can approach these works with detachment and impartiality but as a participant sharing the experiences of the characters and the events they live through." (Abu-Haidar, 1996, pp. 277-281)

In her introduction to Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter*, Jordanian-British novelist, Fadia Faqir, considers the use of the colloquial and the vernacular as a defining style of Arab women writers, allowing them to foster their own literary identity and convey their complex realities and experiences. Arab Women novelists

> create a different language where . . . women's daily experiences and oral cultures are placed at the epicentre of the current discourse. Since the dominant language excludes them, they pushed standard Arabic closer to the colloquial in order to be able to present their experiences as completely as possible. (Faqir, 1994, p. vii)

The use of colloquial Arabic always poses a challenge to translators, but in her comment on the translations of the four novels, Abu-Haidar confidently asserts that the translators of these novels have successfully conveyed not only the meaning of a text but also the very spirit pervading in the texts. She states that in the case of that translation of *The Stone of Laughter*, Sophie Bennett "does not give the impression that she encountered insurmountable difficulties when translating the text. Her lucid style, even where the Arabic is vague, provides a clear image of what the author intends to convey." The translator "goes beyond the literal meaning of a word, by providing *le mot juste* in the English context." (Abu-Haidar, 1996, pp. 277-281) The same applies to the translator of Bakr's *The Golden Chariot*, Dinah Manisty. Her faithful translation of the original has "produced a literary text breathing a life of its own, without giving the impression that it is a translation." (Abu-Haidar, 1996, p. 277-281) Elsewhere in her introduction to the translation of *The Golden Chariot*, Abu-Haidar attributes the success of the translation to Dinah Manisty's knowledge of colloquial Egyptian made it possible for her to preserve the local colours in the translation. Her years spent studying Egyptian women writers in Egypt meant that she is perfectly suited to this translation, which relies heavily on detailed and colloquial storytelling." (Abu-Haidar, 1995)

While Farida Abu-Haidar may commend the translation of these four novels for their fidelity in capturing the originals' essence, it is crucial to recognize that the surge in translating Arab women writers is frequently shaped by market pressures that cater to Orientalist stereotypes or Western feminist agendas. Such agendas often portray Arab women as oppressed and in need of liberation through translation. Within these intersecting dynamics of Orientalism and feminism, Arab women writers and the broader Islamic world remain vulnerable to the risks of mistranslation and misrepresentation. As Sanaa Benmessaoud has noted, Arab

women's literature has "from the beginning, been at the intersection of multiple hierarchies, including gender, social class, patriarchal, neo-colonial and, for some writers, colonial violence." (Sanaa Benmessaoud, 2015, p. 67) Echoing these concerns, M. Lynx Qualey observes that "when Arab women are translated into English, the characters often reflect the prejudices of Westerners" (Qualey, 2021), further complicating how these narratives are received and understood.

2. THE TRANSLATION OF WOMEN OF SAND AND MYRRH AND THE NEED FOR POLITICS AND RESISTANCE IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

In her "Gender, Genre, and the (Missing) Gazelle: Arab Women Writers and the Politics of Translation," Michelle Hartman, a university professor, writer and renowned translator of Arabic literature,[1] states that what is seen as a faithful translation usually implies making the text accessible to a Western audience. She affirms at the outset that

> It is almost commonplace to assert that a literary translation participates in the economy of the language, culture, and literature into which it is translated rather than the one from which it comes. In the case of Arab women writers translated into English, this participation is deeply linked to the widespread misrepresentations of Arabs and Muslims… that draw upon all-too-familiar notions of exoticism, misogyny, and oppression in order to understand them as Other. (Hartman 2012, p. 18)

Translation is not simply a neutral technical activity. First of all, the selection of a text for translation is itself a political and ideological decision. Hartman agrees with Marilyn Booth that in a reception environment shaped by negative stereotypes of Arabs, the texts which are selected for translation are often those that reinforce the image of the Arab woman as an oppressed victim.

Second, the process of translation itself can alter the meaning and the focus of the text. In the case of Arab women, Hartman says, translation has constructed them as submissive and lacking agency and the Arab man as ruthlessly violent. One of the cases Hartman studies is what she describes as "the translation scandal," borrowing a phrase from Venuti, is the translation of Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Shaykh's novel *Misk al-Ghazal* (1989), translated in 1992 as *Women of Sand and Myrrh* by Catherine Cobham.

Hartman focuses on two aspects: the translation of the title and the rearrangement of the plot by reordering the chapters and analysing how this choice "reveals how gender and the politics of translation intersect. These translation choices change the text's message and meaning and have an impact on the work's reception in English. Moreover, all of these issues are intimately tied to questions of gender—these changes highlight women's oppression and the exotic location of the work, diminish the agency of the characters, and recast the original novel's positive ending." (Hartman, 2012, pp. 41-42)

For Hartman, the original title, "*Misk Al-Ghazal*," is associated with Tamr's reminiscence on her memories of her arranged marriage with an older man and her sensuality. The image of the gazelle and the musk evokes the exotic desert, with Tamr as "the beautiful gazelle hunted for its musk." (Hartman, 2012, p. 43) Furthermore, "drawing the title of the

novel from the story of Tamr, which concludes the Arabic original, reinforces its uplifting ending — Tamr emerges the proud owner of her shop, registered in her name, and on the way to financial independence. The title underlines the only section of the book in which a woman is able to envision a life for herself without relying on men." All this vanishes from the translated title. Not only does *Women of Sand and Myrrh* bury her chapter in the middle of the novel but this change of title de-emphasizes Tamr's section and the work's ending in favor of the plural 'women.'" The novel deals with the complex ways Arab women cope with their very different situations. In the English title, women are prominently visible, yet "they are grammatically equated with one another so as to flatten both their experiences and the feminist message of the text." (Hartman, 2012, p. 44)

At the level of the plot, Suha relocates with her husband to a Gulf country, which she does not like. She is nostalgic for her homeland, Lebanon. Suha meets and befriends Nur, a wealthy local woman, and starts a sexual relationship with her. During most of her story, Suha endeavours and succeeds to leave the desert and her acquaintances there and return to Lebanon. Nur is an Arabian woman who discovers her husband to be gay. She is divorced by her second husband because he finds her too unruly and wild and engages in promiscuous relationships with men and women. Suzanne is an American woman living with her husband in the Gulf. She leaves her inattentive husband and elopes with an Arab. Eager to remain with her lover in the desert, she learns the desert dialect and traditions. Tamr in the final story is a local woman. Her mother was brought as a slave to the Gulf. Tamr, who married and divorced at an early age, is reluctant to get married again and wants to start a shop. Her brother refuses but she remains intransigent and he finally gives in and starts her business. The novel ends with her achieving financial independence by opening a hairdressing and dressmaking shop.

Hartman affirms that the reordering of the chapters and the splitting of Suha's story so that it opens and ends the plot radically alter the focus reading of the novel:

> With her story framing the English version, all of the other stories are mediated by it and Suha thereby becomes the novel's most important character. In addition, her Lebanese nationality becomes centrally important to the work… Finally, and crucially to the meaning of the novel, ending with a brief section of Suha's, rather than Tamr's story divests the novel of its feminist message of women's empowerment. (Hartman, 2012, p. 38)

Another disempowering translation move is that *Women of Sand and Myrrh* ends with Suha fleeing from Arabia and returning to a war-torn Lebanon. The ending in *Misk al-Ghazal*, however, focuses on Tamr, the poorest character, returning home to her country as an independent woman. "This is a powerful message and conveys the image of a strong and determined, traditional Arab woman." (Hartman, 2012, p. 38)

Thus, while *Misk al-Ghazal* emphasises the agency of an Arab woman, Women *of Sand and Myrrh* emphasises her oppression. Therefore, to save the original text from the scandalous violence of translation, Hartman suggests that "we must emphasise the theory and practice of the translations produced and advocate for an ethically grounded, contextualised process of both translation and reading. This translation praxis and reading method should be based on a theoretical understanding of cross-cultural translation issues and the particular histories and contexts of the writings of Arab women. In particular, building on feminist theory and practice, we must integrate such approaches into our reading, scholarship, and teaching while taking into account the totalizing nature of previous work on Arab women and resisting it." (Hartman, 2012, p. 22)

Following Lawrence Venuti, Hartman promotes "foreignizing" over "domesticating" translation because “Such a translation strategy emphasises the difference of the foreign text while disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language.” (Hartman, 2012, p.22) She goes on to explain that “Foreignization can work as a strategy on a number of levels: from which works to choose for translation, to how to convey the meaning of both large trends and specific lexical items.” Hartman cites an example from Peter Clark’s domesticating translation of an Arabic expression meaning literally “the feet of donkeys,” signifying a hopeless footballer, in one of the short stories of the Emirati Muhammad al-Murr. Clark translated the expression into fluent English as “two left feet.” Clark was criticised “for removing a vivid term that had the flavour of old Dubai. The use of the word 'donkey' in Arabic, *humar*, is strong, almost explosive and certainly very insulting.” Hartman comments that Clark’s translation and the criticism he received illustrate how the translation of “one particular expression is a clear example of the tension between the desire for a fluent, ‘domesticated’ tone and for an expression that retains the unfamiliarity (to Western readers) of the original.” (Hartman, 2012, p. 23)

Foreignizing translation is for Hartman an ethical solution to the scandalous violence inflicted on the source text. It helps redress unequal cultural exchanges and “can be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism, in the interests of democratic geopolitical relations.” (Hartman 2012, p. 22) Hence, Tarek Shamma’s highly favourable attitude to Hartman’s translation strategy:

> Hartman explores the possibility of a “resistant translation,” one that subverts relations of imbalance between Arabic-speaking and English-speaking worlds… she emphasises the necessity of bringing theoretical insights into practice, without risking cozy generalizations about resistance strategies that work for all contexts. For this purpose, Hartman uses Ashour’s text as a location to work through questions about politics and resistance in translation studies. (Shamma, 2016, p. 10)

Hartman campaigns against domestication translation techniques and proposes an approach to translation “informed by feminist methods, placing an emphasis on an ethics of difference” to critique and challenge Western misconceptions about Arab women. In addition to her concept of the “ethics of difference”, Hartman proposes “reading methods that foreground a contextualization and historicization of Arab women's creative production within, rather than against, Arabic literary traditions.” (Hartman, 2012, p. 19)

3. TRANSLATOR VS AUTHOR: THE DOMESTICATION OF ALSANEA’S *GIRLS OF RIYADH*

While Hartman has studied the translation of *Women of Sand and Myrrh* with a particular focus on the intervention of the translator to domesticate the texts within the politics of the market and the expectations of the audience, Marilyn Booth, on the other hand, addresses how the original Arab author compromises with the political agencies and exigencies of the West, serving an exotic marketing agenda.

Marilyn Booth is a notable British translator, scholar and Professor of Contemporary Arab World Studies at the University of Oxford. She has translated many literary works by Arab writers, especially women writers, and contributed immensely to introducing Arabic literature to the anglophone market and international readership. The works she translated

include Saudi Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (2007); Omani Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies* (2016) and *Bitter Orange Tree* (2019); Egyptian Sahar Tawfiq's, *Points of the Compass* (1995); Lebanese Hoda Barakat's *Voices of the Lost* (2021) and *Disciples of Passion* (2005); Egyptian Somaya Ramadan's *Leaves of Narcissus* (2007); Egyptian Latifa al-Zayyat's *The Open Door* (2017); Lebanese Hassan Daoud's *The Penguin's Song* (2014); Egyptian Nawal el Sa'adawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1994); Iraqi Alia Mamdouh's *The Loved Ones* (2007); and Egyptian Ibtihal Salem's *Children of the Waters* (2003). Marilyn Booth also published anthologies: *My Grandmother's Cactus: Stories by Egyptian Women* (1998) and an academic book *Classes of Ladies of Cloistered Spaces: Writing Feminist History through Biography in fin-de-siècle Egypt* (2005). She published numerous essays and studies on Arabic literary translations, the politics of the selections of the texts for translation, the translation practice, issues of authorship, and the marketing industry.

Booth stresses that translation requires intensive research into the culture of the translated text because, she explains, "translation also involves a ton of research to do it right." (Lenfield, 2021) She is keen to highlight the cultural and linguistic specificities of the original text and combat Stereotyped Images of Oriental societies, especially homogenizing and harem packaging of Muslim women. And most importantly she "tries to listen for the voice of the writer and characters—what it sounds like to her in Arabic, and what it might sound like in English." (Lenfield, 2021) Finally, she says, "Often being literal — or almost literal — is the best way to do it. So I try to let the Arabic guide me. I'm also a translator who often leaves quite a lot of Arabic in the text, and I have to come up with ways of explaining that but without being heavy about it." (Booth, 2020)

Booth has implemented her postcolonial translation strategy in her translation of Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*. But the final version published by Penguin in 2007 was profoundly domesticated. Booth published two scholarly articles to critique the author and Penguin editor for intervening with her translation: "The Muslim Woman As Celebrity Author and the Politics of Translating Arabic: Girls of Riyadh Go on the Road" and "Translator vs. Author: *Girls of Riaydh* Go to New York."

The publishers and marketers prefer works by Arab and Muslim authors "'transparent' translation that privileges sociological content over literary texture and the thickness of locale." (Booth, 2008, p. 197) The publishers privilege texts that reinforce rather than challenge homogenized images of Arabs and Muslims and their cultures. In her article, "Translator vs. Author: *Girls of Riaydh* Go to New York", Booth talks about her experience with the translation of Saudi novelist Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* and the revisions that her translation was subjected to by the publisher and the author. Booth states that the "revisions made by the press and author to her translation domesticate the text and mute the novel's gender politics" (Booth, 2008, p. 197) to make the text assimilable within the Anglophone market and readership. The result is an Orientalizing of the Other through what she calls in her essay "The Muslim Woman As Celebrity Author and the Politics of Translating Arabic," "Orientalist ethnographic" which she defines as "a way of seeing and writing the Other that grounds authority in a written narrative of personal experience, 'capturing' a society through the I/eye; and furthermore, claiming the authority of graphing the text in a global (and globalizing) language of reception, which is today predominantly English." (Booth, 2010, p. 151) In other words "These effects produce a work and author-figure both exotic and familiar" and transform artistic fiction and the author's creative product into an ethnographic memoir.

It is a translation which allows the Occident to peer into the hidden life, especially female life, of the Orient, a peep into the secrets of the harem. Booth quotes the publicity material on the Amazon website: "[A]n inside peek into a hidden world.... Never-ending cultural conflicts underscore the difficulties of being an educated modern female growing up in the 21st century in a culture firmly rooted to an ancient way of life." (Booth, 2010, p. 166) Hence, Booth

comments, "The veiled female face, often of the author though not always, has become a familiar visual trope advertising books in English (whether translated or not) on and from the Middle East, whether on the dust jacket or in interviews, reviews, and advertisements." (Booth, 2010, p. 158)

In fact, within the framework of marketing and consumption, fiction and memoir "genres merge into an 'Islamic-world crossover genre' where fiction and memoir are homogenized or at least blurred (in acts of consumption if not production) to an unusual degree, and where the mining of information makes little distinction between the two." (Booth, 2010, p. 156) She explains in an interview with Alice Guthrie:

> With that in mind, then, orientalist ethnographicism is this whole focus on tell-all memoirs, especially ones by women; it's an iconography of the veil and stripping it off – the 21st-century version of 'harem literature' and the promise of the hidden exotic. It has had an impact on what publishers want and will go for – exposé, basically. It also builds on the longstanding and unfortunate focus with regard to Arabic literature (and some other 'world literatures') on asking for sociology or for political information instead of asking for literature. (Booth, 2013)

Booth herself was subjected to the politics of "orientalist ethnographicism." In her translation of *Girls of Riaydh*, Booth adopted a foreignizing perspective with the aim "to produce a translation honouring this generationally distinctive voice in its rich intertextual world—a voice blending hip international cyber youth language, Arabic vernaculars, more standardized 'educated Arabic,' and a spoken hybrid Arabenglish—along with, as noted, song lyrics, contemporary poetry, and a globalized consumer shorthand represented in fashion brand names." (Booth, 2010, p. 170)

While Booth acknowledges the right of the author of his/her text and is critical of the right or power of the "first-world" translator to speak for "postcolonial" texts she refuses that the role of the translator is reduced to a secondary servile role. In a letter that Marilyn Booth sent to the London *Times Literary Supplement*, she insists on "the translator's linguistic expertise and cultural sensitivity". She says,

> Perhaps the larger scandal, though, is that for some publishers and writers, literary translators remain derivative servitors rather than creative artists, a notion fostered by a long tradition within Euro-American letters of the writer as a solitary genius and translation as a mechanical exercise (and now enhanced by the "star system" of today's publishing business). That the press and author did not take my professionalism seriously or listen to my warnings that their choices would yield an inferior and infelicitous result will not be a surprise to translators. (Booth, 2007)

Because her warnings were not taken seriously, she affirms that the "revisions made by press and author to my translation assimilated it to chick-lit generic conventions in the anglophone marketplace, muting the gender politics and situatedness of multiple kinds of Arabic that acted, in the original novel, as a critique of the Saudi system." (Booth, 2010, p. 173)

Discussing her translation of *Girls of Riyadh*, Booth argues that the fact that Rajaa Alsanea "has been able to dismiss my reading of the text and replace it with hers challenges a

frequently-adduced theme in postcolonial translation studies: the notion that the 'first-world translator' might have the power to shape the "third-world text." (Booth, 2010, p. 151). However, in the case of Alsanea/author versus Booth/translator,

> between the presence of my name on the title page, its absence in the Acknowledgments, and Alsanea's invocation of me as a desultory editor of her English lies a story of text circulation and commodification that, I argue, is best understood when one considers the apparatus of publicity and public image-making along with the less visible process of actually producing the text of a translation. (Booth, 2010, p. 150)

Marilyn Booth repeatedly states that the selection of fictional works to be translated from Arabic into English is basically motivated by political and ideological considerations rather than by the aesthetic value of the text itself. Hence, Booth explains that the *best-seller* Arab novels "eschew the myriad experimental and thematically and stylistically complex writing practices of many novelists in the Arab world today in favor of a plot-driven, chronologically straightforward realism that is the hallmark of popular fiction." (Booth, 2010, p.156)

In an interview with Claire Jacobson, Marilyn Booth is frustrated at the tragic state of the publication of the translation of Arabic literature:

> Given all that is going on in the Arab region, all the tragedy people are facing, the long tragedy the Palestinian people have endured, and the persistence of Orientalist stereotypes about "Arabs" and "Muslims"—and given the fact that publishers aren't necessarily keen to publish what we think is most important to translate—the works we choose to translate, the ways we translate them, the editing, and the choice of cover art all have political stakes.

To project a traditional society, "Markers of cosmopolitan existence—which allow participation in Saudi elite life at home and a transnational existence elsewhere—are erased in the available English version (though not entirely)." (Booth, 2010, p. 168) Thus international literary market of Arabic literature "fetishizes foreignness, exhibiting the foreign as exotic good, it also near-neutralizes that foreignness, homogenizing it into an anglophone pop-lit lingua franca. Domesticated, the foreignness no longer threatens or even challenges in its presence. Ironically, this erasure enacts the commodification of language that the Arabic novel *Banat al-Riyadh* explores critically."

Booth notes that in *Banat al-Riyadh* the Saudi elite uses a language that combines Arabic and English in a form of lingua franca. For Booth, the juxtaposition of colloquial speech and English conjures up a Saudi cosmopolitan elite that is in constant negotiation between the local and global, and challenges, at least in the world of the novel, the prevalent image of Saudi society in Western media as a closed society. Hence, in her translation Booth "had transliterated this Arabenglish from the Arabic to convey this language politics" She says "English eruptions in the Arabic convey characters' partial, specific worldliness, which I did not want to lose. I conveyed this globalized vernacular by italicizing phrases in Arabenglish and spelling them phonetically." For instance, as her translation of the phrase "sheez soo kiyirvy (she's so curvy)." (Booth, 2007, p. 204) Such foreignizing strategy is erased by the editor in the

published version. Booth observes that "the erasure of difference in the language of the published translation mutes this commercial give-and-take by erasing the Arabenglish transactional lingo of the globalized." Booth quotes Alsanea's tendency toward domestication in her "Author's Note" where she says that the published translation has omitted elements that would not "make sense to the non-Arab reader." (Booth, 2010, p. 169) Booth is unhappy. She comments that "this reshaping of the English text altered the politics I had read in the Arabic text…. Penguin's decision to give full control of the translation to Alsanea after I had submitted my very different translation yielded, in my opinion, a text stripped of its political valence, muted in its gender politics, and denied its quite distinct voice." Elsewhere, she states that "author and/or editor wanted the book to blend in with the Anglophone popular fiction market which depends on familiar, at times formulaic, and certainly repetitive structures and styles to maintain its large audience in a context governed by the dual pressures of industry and entertainment." (Booth, 2010, p. 170)

And, invoking Venuti's concept of the "illusion of transparency," Booth says:

> The revised *Girls of Riyadh* published by Penguin prefers an easy accessibility and monolingual anglicized tone to a rendering that emphasizes its rootedness in cosmopolitan Arabic language and culture. It gives play to similarity (the Arab Sex and the City) over cultural variance, "equivalence" via smooth cliché over the more interesting bumpiness of stressing locality, over a "resistant translation" that reminds readers that this text did not originate in English. The published text offers an "assimilationist ethic that is called for in popular aesthetic—the illusion of transparency. (Booth, 2010, pp. 171-172)

In her critique of Alsanea, Booth also invokes Mona Baker's idea of framing as consisting of "deliberate discursive moves designed to anticipate and guide others' interpretation of and attitudes towards a set of events" to argue that "Alsanea and editors reframed the novel in English by altering my translation: they reduced the available feminist narrative that I had played up with my choices. I am not assessing "accuracy" here, but I would argue that my translation remains "closer" to the original Arabic in reproducing (not omitting) lexica, modes of address, and genres of cultural repartee." Booth concludes bitterly, "Alsanea's "renarration" (Baker's concept) of my "renarration" of her Arabic narrative suggests the power of situatedness in acts of translation." (Booth, 2010, p. 174)

In a telling passage, Booth emphasises that her task was to "bring the reader to the work"—to insist on an English rendering that would defamiliarize the text, draw readers into its Arabic discursive world, complicate Orientalist desires, raise questions about the extent to which it could be read easily as a transplanted Sex and the City, and obligate audiences to take account of its political critique." On the other hand, the main aim of Alsanea and the publisher/editor was to "bring the work to the reader" and to undermine its gender politics to make it easy for the audience "to consume the familiar Otherness of this story set in Saudi Arabia." (Booth, 2010, p. 175)

To prepare the *Girls of Riyadh* for the market and for comfortable consumption by the Anglophone reader, the published version of the novel "emphasizes immediate accessibility over 'surrender to the text', similarity over difference, transparent 'equivalence' over pitfalls of locality… it favors the 'high readability' of chick lit over the punning satire, local embeddedness and intertextual play important to the power and novelty of this novel in Arabic." (Booth, 2008, p. 201)

Booth's two articles, "The Muslim Woman As Celebrity Author and the Politics of Translating Arabic: Girls of Riyadh Go on the Road" and "Translator vs. Author: *Girls of Riaydh* Go to New York" are a devastating critique of the domestication revisions made to the translation of the novel by the author and editor to make it conform to the expectations of the reader and the requirements of the market.

Booth is aware that translation is often implicated in what she calls "Orientalist ethnographic," by which she means "a way of seeing and writing the Other that grounds authority in a written narrative of personal experience, 'capturing' a society through the I/eye; and furthermore, claiming the authority of graphing the text in a global (and globalizing) language of reception, which is today predominantly English." (Booth, 2010, p. 151) Booth is equally aware of the politics and power dynamics involved in the process of translation, the expectations of the readership, the market, and the historical and ideological load of the English language. In her translation, she is keen to invest the Arabic text with its original agency. She tries to do this by first considering translation an artistic creative process and not merely a mechanical linguistic exercise. "For me," she insists, "translation is an intertwined aesthetic and political act." (Booth, 2013)

4. CONCLUSION

Translating Arab women writers is far from an artistic or purely technical endeavour. The very act of selecting texts for translation is laden with political and ideological implications, often reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes about Muslim cultures. This process can reshape the essence and worldview of the original work, creating narratives that perpetuate entrenched biases. Translation frequently portrays Arab women as oppressed and lacking agency within a patriarchal society, transforming such representations into popular fiction. As Lila Abu-Lughod observes in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, "Published by trade presses, reviewed widely, and adopted by book clubs and women's reading groups, a lurid genre of writing on abused women—mostly Muslim—exploded onto the scene in the 1990s and took off after 9/11" (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 87). Any departure from this image challenges the expectations of publishers and readers. Translator Adam Talib highlighted this in his 2013 talk, "Translating for Bigots," noting,

> Translating Arab women characters is…extremely fraught. Why? Because if you're a reader of modern Arabic literature, you know what happens in modern Arabic literature. People date in modern Arabic literature; people have sex in modern Arabic literature; people drink and take drugs. And a lot of times, you will just translate what you find on the page, and you'll find that reviewers find this peculiar. If a reviewer…finds an Arab woman not wrapped in ten layers of fabric, forced to marry her cross-eyed cousin, and pushed to the back seat of a car, then the reviewer says, 'What an unrealistic depiction of Arab women.' (Talib, 2013)

This explains the adjustments to Arab women's fiction by translators and publishers. This was true not only for Hanan al-Shaykh's novel *Misk al-ghazal* but also for her novel *Hikayat Zahra* (1980), her first novel to be translated into English by Peter Ford in 1986 as *The Story of Zahra*. Hartman notes that the translation's extensive editing dramatically changes several elements of the original text to "produce a text that serves particular ideological functions in English, consistent with a horizon of expectations that constructs Arab women as oppressed and passive victims." Hartman concludes that "the English-language novel *The Story of Zahra* functions within an ideological field that recycles stereotypes and tropes about Arab women" (Hartman, 2020, p. 83).

The notion of "saving" Muslim women through translation sometimes adopts a feminist guise, as Western feminists and feminist presses eagerly collaborate to translate and publish the works of Arab women writers. This collaboration, while seemingly empowering, frequently imposes Western feminist frameworks onto these texts, shaping the narrative of their reception. The enthusiasm surrounding the translation of *Year of the Elephant* by Leila Abouzeid and *Blood Feast* by Malika Moustadraf, translated by Alice Guthrie, underscores this trend.

Although Abouzeid asserts that she is not a feminist, at least not in the Western sense (Khanoussi, 2010, p. 178), her novel *Year of the Elephant* is nonetheless positioned within a feminist framework. In Barbara Parmenter's English translation, it carries the subtitle *A Moroccan Woman's Journey toward Independence,* which underscores a feminist perspective. Additionally, Elizabeth Warnock Fernea's extensive introduction to the translation presents Abouzeid's work through a feminist lens, subtly guiding readers and critics to interpret the novella in terms of Western feminist ideals, particularly regarding empowerment and resistance to patriarchy.

Similarly, Guthrie's translator's note in *Blood Feast*, published by Feminist Press, occupies almost a third of the book and serves as a significant framing device. It underscores feminist themes and contextualizes Moustadraf's work in terms that resonate with Western feminist discourse. Although Moustadraf never actually associated herself with feminism, Guthrie describes her as "a feminist literary activist focused on sexuality, patriarchy, disability, illness, class, and women's rights" (Guthrie, 2022). In the British version of *Blood Feast*, published by Saqi Books in 2022 under the title *Something Strange, Like Hunger*, Guthrie describes Malika Moustadraf as "a cult feminist icon in contemporary Moroccan literature, celebrated for her uncompromising depiction of life on the margins" (Saqi Books, 2022). This expression is repeatedly echoed in the book's publicity materials.

By preemptively defining the terms through which these texts are interpreted, these paratexts—introductions, translator's notes, and editorial choices—play an active role in assigning a feminist agenda to these narratives, potentially reframing the original author's intentions to fit Western expectations.

Hartman and Booth's critical examinations cast a revealing light on the intricate and complex realm of gender translation, especially the manipulation processes in the translation of fiction by Arab women novelists. To them, the resulting distortions are scandalous but pedagogically enlightening, prompting a call for a comprehensive reconsideration of translation methodologies and reception theories within the Arab cultural context, as well as an examination of the politics inherent in Western feminism. To counter this scandalous translation, Hartman and Booth advocate for Gayatri Spivak's concept of "literalist surrender," (Spivak, 2009, p. 205) where the translator immerses themselves in the text, capturing its linguistic idiosyncrasies, and allowing the original voices within it to be heard. This intimate engagement with the original text serves to preserve its distinctive essence and original foreignness, while simultaneously undermining embedded cultural biases in the target language. Lawrence Venuti characterises this approach as "resistant translation," (Venuti, 1998, p. 6) a necessary ethical response to counteract the potential violence inflicted on the source text.

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