Modern Arabic Fiction in English: *The Yacoubian Building*; a Case in Point

Ficción moderna árabe en inglés: Yacoubian Building; un caso ilustrativo

Norah ALKHARASHI

University of Ottawa; Canada

n.alkharashi@gmail.com

Abstract: This article considers translations of modern Arabic fiction to English in the context of contemporary translation theory as a critical approach. Translation theory provides a framework to analyze the cultural and sociological aspects involved in the process of literary translation that can influence the circulation of the final product. Specifically; the *polysystem* theory of Even-Zohar and the *literary fields* and *social agents* of Bourdieu are considered in an exploration of how and why translations from Arabic are undertaken; how and by whom. This paper takes the *Yacoubian Building* [Ar. 'Amaret Yacoubian]; a contemporary novel by Alaa Al Aswani; under consideration for its cultural and literary importance. It is found that contemporary Arabic fiction has shown a slowly increasing presence in the English literary market.

Key words: Arabic-English translation; Arabic fiction; cultural studies; literary translation; *polysystem* theory; sociology of translation; translation studies.

Norah ALKHARASHI
Modern Arabic Fiction in English:
The Yacoubian Building; a Case in Point

CLINA
vol. 2-1, June 2016, 43-59
eISSN: 2444-1961
© Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca - CC BY-NC-ND

43

Resumen: Este artículo aborda las traducciones al inglés de las obras de ficción árabe moderna en el contexto de la teoría de la traducción contemporánea en tanto que aproximación crítica. La teoría de la traducción proporciona un marco de estudio para analizar los aspectos culturales y sociológicos que intervienen en el proceso de la traducción literaria y que pueden influir en la circulación del producto final. En concreto; la *teoría de los polisistemas* de Even-Zohar y *los campos literarios* y *agentes sociales* de Bourdieu se consideran una exploración del cómo; por qué y por quién se lleva a cabo las traducciones de árabe. En este trabajo se considera; por su importancia cultural y literaria; una novela contemporánea de Alaa Al Aswani; *Yacoubian Building* ['Amaret Yacoubian en árabe]. Se sostiene que la ficción árabe contemporánea ha incrementado lentamente su presencia en el mercado literario inglés.

Palabras clave: traducción árabe-inglés; ficción árabe; estudios culturales; traducción literaria; teoría de los polisistemas; sociología de la traducción; estudios de traducción.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1990, Edward Said wrote an article which suggested that Arabic literature is being «embargoed» in the English[1] literary market (Said 1990). Said was reporting on a personal experience with a major New York based publisher who rejected his suggestion to translate a novel by Naguib Mahfouz who was subsequently awarded the 1988 Nobel Prize in Literature. The rejection, as Said put it, was the result of prevailing prejudice against Arabic language as being «controversial», and its literary translation as «poor quality» (Said 1990: 279). This intriguing anecdote was, and still is, very popular among Arab writers, Arabic translators and postcolonial scholars [among them, Richard Jacquemond (1992), Richard van Leeuwen (2004), Denys Johnson-Davies (2006), and Marilyn Booth (2008)], who have commented on the lack of interest in modern Arabic literature from the English literary market. But do Said's observations still remain as relevant today as they were 25 years ago?

A contemporary assessment shows encouraging signs of change and the embargo metaphor may no longer stand up to scrutiny. Peter Clark (2000) warns of perpetuating such generalized perceptions of transnational literary markets. Although the English literary scene is insular in its taste (only 2-5% of books published in English speaking countries are translations), the presence of Arabic literature is steadily increasing. According to *Three Percent: A Resource for International Literature at the University of Rochester*, this is evidenced by the 30 Arabic titles published in English in 2014 alone, which puts Arabic right after French, Spanish and German in popularity in the United States and England. Some titles have been popular enough to be published

---

1   The frame of reference and the language term «English» refers primarily to the UK and the US.

in paperback, such as *Cities of Salt*[2] (1987) by Abdulrahman Munif [Trans. Peter Theroux]. Similarly, *Season for Migration to the North*[3] (1969) by Tayeb Salih [Trans. Denys Johnson-Davis] eventually found its way into the prestigious Penguin Classics in 2003. Yet to some, Arabic fiction is a specialty, seldom leaving the walls of Arabic and Middle Eastern classrooms (Booth 2008): it has been found to have a lesser impact on the Anglophone reading public compared to Russian or Spanish fiction (Büchler *et al.* 2011). Modern Arabic fiction in translation could benefit from new and innovative critical approaches that can account for its complex and somewhat contradictory circumstances.

For this paper, I consider contemporary theories in translation studies. Until very recently, translation studies were very much a matter of linguistic phenomena. In 1978, Itamar Even-Zohar published *The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem*, and translations began to be thought of as sociolinguistic and cultural phenomena. The *polysystem* theory dynamically locates literary systems as part of wider political, economic and social systems, and identifies literary translations as the focus for studying cultural exchanges. According to Kershaw (2009; 4) the «polysystems theory was using translation as a means of analyzing culture in the 1970s», well before cultural studies spread globally through the 1980s and 1990s. Despite its important contributions, *polysystem* theory lacked a substantial sociological basis that can account for different social agents in the process of translation, such as translators, critics, editors and publishers (Hermans 1999). I shall borrow the sociology required from Bourdieu, whose theory of *literary fields* is described by Buzelin (2006) and Kershaw (2009; 2013) as the most productive analytical tool for examining contemporary literature in translation and publishing.

The goal of this paper is to open up the discussion of modern Arabic fiction in English translation by focusing on one recent successful translation. The novel under consideration is *The Yacoubian Building*[4] (2004), an internationally-acclaimed novel by Alaa Al Aswany [Trans. Humphrey T. Davies], which was published under the prolific Harper Perennial imprint and enjoyed great success in the United States and England. The novel enjoyed the same success in other 22 other languages[5] as well. Although one case study is not enough to draw any generalizations on the unpredictable and dynamic scene of literary translation from Arabic into English, I hope my holistic analysis will lead to a more complete understanding of specific aspects of the situation; and provide valid information that would not otherwise be considered.

---

2 Original: Al Munif, Abdulrahman. 1984. *Mudun Al Milh.* Beirut: AIRP.
3 Original: Salih, Tayb.1966. *Mawsim al-Hiǧra ilā ash-Shamāl.* Beirut: Dar Al Awdah.
4 Original: Al ASwani, Alaa. 2002. Amaret Yaqubian. Cairo: Madbouly Books.
5 It was also adapted into a movie with the same title in 2006.

I set the scene for the analysis by providing a background of the multiple trends and agents involved in the process of translating Arabic literature. Then, I introduce the relevant theories from translation studies as an analytical framework and critical approach for analysis. Finally, I present a case study of *The Yacoubian Building* (2004) and its reviews in English-speaking media to illustrate and explain these changes. The findings show that the literary book market is constantly changing, and, thus, previous analytical models can lose their explanatory power and new observations become necessary.

2. ARABIC LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION (1988-2014): ISSUES AND TRENDS

Büchler *et al.* (2011) suggest that there are some major literary and political events during this time that have brought more attention to the Arab world, namely: Naguib Mahfouz winning the Nobel Prize in 1988, the September 2001 events in the United States, and the *Arab Spring* of early 2010. In what follows I present a brief exploration of these periods with mention of the major trends in relation to publishers, translators, reviewers and critics.

3. THE NOBEL PRIZE GOES TO NAGUIB MAHFOUZ (1988)

The 20th century witnessed a development of Arabic novels, short stories and plays unprecedented in the history of the language. This was largely inspired by waves of translations, led by Egyptians, from French and other European languages that closed the intellectual and cultural gap between Egypt and Europe, and promoted cross-cultural dialogue with the former colonizers (Jacquemond 1992; 2004). Many writers, who were later credited as founders of this new literary tradition, invested in and experimented with these new genres, including Taha Hussein (6 novels), Tawfiq al-Hakim (6 novels and 2 plays) and Naguib Mahfouz (35 novels). However, Büchler *et al.* (2011) comment that translations of these works remain marginal in the commercial English book market, and that Arabic literature, specifically, is read primarily within experts' circles and behind the closed doors of academia. For a long time, this cultural exchange «consisted of a one-way flow of information, knowledge and images, imposing the Eurocentric[6] worldview on the colonial and semi-colonial areas» (van Leeuwen

---

6   Including the «Anglo-centric», since English is a European language.

2004: 11). These observations have important consequences for the evaluation of the position of Arabic literature today.

Contemporary Arabic literature, particularly fiction and drama, was born in the early twentieth century. In cultural studies, this period is often marked by the hegemonic relations between the West[7] and the Arab World (see for example Jacquemond 1992 and 2004). Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) was the first scholar who established a link between this political reality and the cultural and communication flow (or blockage) between western and Arabic countries. According to Said (1990), Arabic culture and cultural productions in the postcolonial era, including literature, were perceived and analyzed by western orientalists and academics through «a systematic set of representations of the Orient» that served political aims, which lead to a view of the Arabic culture as the distant other. These representations have transformed the Arab World into «a panorama of stereotypes» which replaced interest in the true nature of Arab intellectual and cultural production (Jacquemond 2004: 118). Many critics and scholars of that time felt that Arabic fiction and drama were decried by critics and publishers as immature, inexperienced, and thus irrelevant to outsiders (Jabra 1971, Said 1990, van Leeuwen 2004, Altouma 2005). Hence, Said's unsuccessful attempt to attract a commercial publishing house to Naguib Mahfouz's work prior to his Nobel Prize win in 1988. Denys Johnson-Davies (2006), a prominent translator of that period, testified that it was almost impossible to find a publisher willing to take on Arabic fiction in English translation.

This was the case until Naguib Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988—Arabic literature was put on the transnational map of cultural exchanges. Bourdieu (2008) argued that publishers get interested in publishing «a foreign Nobel Prize winner» in order to increase both their financial and symbolic capital[8]. This was the case of Arabic literature in English translation after Mahfouz's literary Prize.

Büchler *et al.* (2011) noticed that a gradual but crucial expansion in academic and commercial interest in Arabic literature ensued, which gave a degree of respect and legitimacy to Arabic literary production. Denys Johnson-Davies's task of finding publishers was slowly becoming «less torturous» (2006: 45). Indeed, he published translations of around ten novels and anthologies during this period, but with nominal profit. The rise of the social and academic feminist movement in the latter part of this period also provoked an interest in Arab women novelists and poets. For example, Nawal Saadawi (1977, trans.1980), Hanan al-Shaykh (1989, trans. 1992) and Fadwa

---

7   I use the West here to refer to countries in Europe and North America without any political reference that this word may connote.

8   Briefly, in Bourdieu's theory of sociology *symbolic capital* is a collection of recourses that can give an individual or an institution prestige and recognition and thus increase their political, social or financial capital (2008).

Norah ALKHARASHI
Modern Arabic Fiction in English:
The Yacoubian Building; a Case in Point

CLINA
vol. 2-1, June 2016, 43-59
eISSN: 2444-1961
© Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca - CC BY-NC-ND

47

Tuqan (1985, trans.1990) began to appear in English, often translated by female translators.

This striking shift from the earlier phases not only increased the frequency and regularity of Arabic fiction in English translations, but also the involvement of many publishers in the process. During the 1990s, major commercial publishers, specialized independent publishers, university presses and literary magazines began translating and promoting Arabic fiction for the first time. This had an impact on the geographical demographic of the translated authors which began to diversify[9] to include non-Egyptian writers, with Abdulrahman Al Munif (Saudi Arabia), Hanna Minah (Syria), and Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani (Palestine) being published by major and independent English publishers (Vintage Books, Passeggiata Press, University of California Press and Three Continents Press, respectively)[10]. Clark (2000) argued that this period is marked by small but steadily increasing numbers of English translations.

4. AFTER SEPTEMBER 11TH (2001)

The September 2001 attacks in the United States sparked «a surge of interest in the Arab world», ranging from an increase in classes offered in universities to the consumption of Arabic cultural production (Büchler *et al.* 2011: 18). While the circumstances were dreadful, the events seemingly have influenced the development of literary translations and cultural exchange. Arabic fiction became more available and accessible than before to satisfy the demands of specialized and regular readers. While this sudden growth of interest in Arabic literature was considered a cultural rather than purely literary curiosity (Büchler *et al.* 2011), many Arabic authors and literary translators celebrated these new changes. In this period, government funding and subsidies played an important role in making Arabic literature more visible in the English market. In the United Kingdom, governmental and non-governmental agencies have supported initiatives for bringing Arabic literature closer to the UK audience. For example, the British Council and Arts Council England funded translations from Arabic as part of their provision for publishers. One example here is the anthology *Beirut 39* (2010), edited by Samuel Shimon. The book is the result of collaboration between an Arabic-English literary translation workshop in Cairo and the Hay Telegraph Festival, which selected 39 Arab authors under the age of 39 whose works were published by Bloomsbury as Biuret39. Later initiatives include the introduction of Arabic into the summer school for translators run by the British Centre for Literary Translation in 2010.

9   The early phases consisted almost exclusively of writers who lived in Egypt.
10   For those authors, I chose only the first book published in English. They have other published translations by other publishing houses.

In the United States, the commercial model has been predominant. Large commercial publishing companies bring out socially controversial works with the potential to be best sellers, regardless of literary value. Two major works of this period are *The Yacoubian Building* (2002, trans. 2004) by Alaa Al Aswany (translated by Davis Humphry), and *Girls of Riyadh* (2005, trans. 2007) by Raj'a Alsanea (translated by Marylin Booth). Commenting on her experience with *Girls of Riyadh* [orig. Banat Alriyadh], the translator and professor of Arabic Marilyn Booth writes:

> What little the mega-publishers have accepted from the realms of translated Arabic fiction has been strongly subject to the search for commercially successful works (Booth 2010: 36)

This commercial model can benefit the works and the translators alike. For the first time, we can speak of full-time translators who make a living from their work producing Arabic-English literary translations. For example, prominent and award winning translator Humphrey Davies notes in an interview with the *Quarterly Convention* that there has been increased interest in the West following the events of September 2001, «and this is kind of a fecund period in Arabic literature» (Qualey 2009). Nevertheless, Büchler *et al.* (2011) suggest that this period ended with not enough translations published in English and the works selected for translations too often determined by commercial and socio-political factors.

5. THE ARAB SPRING (2010)

The Arab world attracted global attention as a result of the revolutionary demonstrations calling for political and social reform that began in 2010. Concurrently, prosperous Arab states such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar started initiatives to promote translations between Arabic and English through the Kalima project[11] (since 2010) for translation and the Qatar Foundation (since 2009), respectively. Büchler *et al.* (2011: 18) see this interest in prompting, supporting and subsidizing translation from within the Arab World as an «international promotion» motivated by «an intense need to be understood by the rest of the global community». Similarly, various English publishers have shown even more interest in the literary production of the Arab World. According to the *ThreePercent* database, in 2014 there were 30 works of Arabic fiction and poetry translated and published in English literary magazines and publishing houses. The literary website also reported 24 new titles of translations appearing in 2012, and 16 in 2013. Although not all of these works are distributed entirely in the US

---

11   Supported by AbuDhabi foundation for tourism and culture.

Norah ALKHARASHI
Modern Arabic Fiction in English:
The Yacoubian Building; a Case in Point

CLINA
vol. 2-1, June 2016, 43-59
eISSN: 2444-1961
© Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca - CC BY-NC-ND

49

and the UK, the internet and new technologies make it easier to find Arabic literature in English. Local publishing houses such as Bloomsbury in Qatar publishes and promotes their long list of titles on their website.

This period also witnessed a change in the books and authors selected for translation. According to *ThreePercent*, English publishers are more willing to experiment than before. For example, New Directions, the New York-based publisher, has produced English translations for three of the Lebanese author Rabee Jaber's 18 novels. These novels are *The Druze of Belgrade*12 (2010, trans. 2013)*, The Mehlis Report* (2006, trans. 2013), and *Byretus Underground City* (2005, trans. 2014).

Although Arabic literature in English translation suffered some difficulties and issues two decades ago, recent publications and growing interest indicate change. Today Arabic and Western cultures are part of global culture and thus integrated in many ways (Rooke 2004). This means notions of alterity and problematic differences may not be as important as they used to be. Thus, a new analytical approach is required to understand these phenomena. While Said's postcolonial analytical framework has its merits, it may not currently be the best methodology to study transnational literary exchange between Arabic and English. Moreover, Said's cultural perspectives may leave too little room for variations that come with the dynamic nature of culture. (MacKenzie 1995, Sprinker 1992, Turner 1994 as cited in van Leeuwen 2004). Thus, in the following section I present an analytical framework informed by recent development in translation studies and sociology in order to account for the case of Arabic literature in contemporary English book market.

6. LITERARY TRANSLATION AND CONTEMPORARY TRANSLATION THEORY

Although interest in the subject and the practice of translation go far back in recorded history, the development of translation into an academic discipline emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. Contemporary translation theory can provide theoretical explanations for the case of contemporary Arabic fiction in English translations. It considers the function of translations in the language and the culture of its production and reception, that is, the target culture. This is the approach of scholars who «scientifically» examine what «universal» linguistic and literary norms and laws contribute to the process of producing a translation. According to Kershaw (2009), there is one theoretical framework that has the potential to appreciate the ambiguity and complexity of the literary translation, and at the same time reconcile notions of dominance and power: *polysystem* theory.

12 Jaber has won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) in 2012 for this novel.

Norah ALKHARASHI
Modern Arabic Fiction in English:
The Yacoubian Building; a Case in Point

CLINA
vol. 2-1, June 2016, 43-59
eISSN: 2444-1961
© Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca - CC BY-NC-ND

50

Itamar Even-Zohar introduced *polysystem* theory in the 1970s. The theory synthesizes ideas from Russian formalism, structuralism and sociology to account for the position and function of translated literature in the target language and culture. Thus, translated literature is not considered as a single text, but as a system functioning within many cultural, linguistic, literary, and social systems (hence polysystem) in to which translations are introduced. In a literary polysystem, amongst other things, different literary texts and genres, including translated works, compete for influence and dominance (Even-Zohar 1970/2012: 119). While the literary polysystems are diverse, they are hierarchized as well.

The hierarchy, according to Even-Zohar, defines «the means by which translations were chosen, and the way they functioned within the literary system» (Gentzler 1992: 120). Accordingly, if new literary works occupy the highest position (or are central) in the system, then the lower levels (periphery) are likely to be occupied by traditional works, or vice versa. The contemporary English literary polysystem is largely governed by economic models, wherein literary translations are considered «a specialty task» and thus do not play an important role in the UK and the US literary market (Büchler *et al.* 2011: 18). Even-Zohar (2010) asserts that though the English publishing market is the most productive, it produces proportionately the fewest translations: in the UK 5% of published books are translations, and 3% in the US.

It can thus be concluded that local and national literature are at the center of the contemporary English polysystem, while new and foreign literary works are expected to be peripheral and marginal. While *polysystem* theory accounts for the function of hierarchy within the literary system, it also reconciles the notions of power and dominance.

Even-Zohar asserts that the position of translated literature in the polysystem determines the translation norms, behaviours and policies. If the position is central, translators often apply the literary norms of the source language, producing a translated text that is close to the source text in terms of adequacy. But if the position is peripheral, translators do not feel pressured to comply with the literary and linguistic norms of the source language. Translators use the models and forms that exist in the target culture in order to produce more acceptable translations.

Based on this, Torresi argues that *polysystem* theory «could be reconceptualized as an imaginary landscape that is ruled by the ever-shifting power relations on which postcolonial studies focuses so much» (2013: 219). In the case of Arabic fiction, the books chosen for translation and the best strategy selected for translation are governed by the systems already dominant in the target language. Since an economic model governs the contemporary English literary market, the publisher's understanding of the interests of the audience determines what should be central or peripheral. While *polysystem* theory claims that all translational phenomena can be accounted for by the central/peripheral dichotomy that also determines the norms for translators, the theory still needs to be tested in cultural and social fields. Even-Zohar leaves the relationship between different

Norah ALKHARASHI
Modern Arabic Fiction in English:
The Yacoubian Building; a Case in Point

CLINA
vol. 2-1, June 2016, 43-59
eISSN: 2444-1961
© Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca - CC BY-NC-ND

51

literatures and social conditions and agents who interact with the polysystems and shape it un-theorized. Even-Zohar opens the *polysystem* theory for complimentarity:

> In short, it is a major goal, and a workable possibility for the polysystem theory, to deal with the particular conditions under which a certain literature may be interfered with by another literature, as a result of which properties are transferred from one polysystem to another (Even-Zohar 1990: 25).

Researchers who work in the field of descriptive translation studies and study literary translation closely have been referring to theories from sociology in order to account for systems and norms in relation to agency. For example, Brownlie says that since descriptive approaches borrow the concept of norms from sociology, «it is appropriate to look to sociological and anthropological methods for investigating norms and translators» (1999: 11). Similarly, Meylaerts (2008: 93) suggests that traditional sociological approaches can fill the gap and account for «the relationship between translators and norms, and between system and agency». While *polysystem* theory used translated literature as a means of analyzing relations among cultures in the 1970s, recent sociological methodology provides updated insights on the matter.

The sociology of translation is a growing and productive analytical frame (Wolf and Fukari 2007). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of literary fields, this approach accounts for translated literature as «more than a text, a social field which is collective in nature, determined by relations and differences, and inhabited by agents who constantly struggle for dominance» (Kershaw 2009: 3). Bourdieu[13] (1999/2008) recognizes the social agents that are involved in the field of literary production as:

> The committees and commissions directly responsible for the decision to publish, the editor in chief and his or her close colleagues, series editors, readers, administrative personnel, influential advisors who may act unofficially as series editors, and finally translators, who have often influenced the publication of foreign authors (Bourdieu 2008: 124).

Those agents, according to Bourdieu, are members of the *institutional mechanism* that can influence the reception and production of literary texts including translations. For example, they have the power and resources to decide what should be privileged:

---

13   Originally the essay by Bourdieu was published in (1999) as *Une révolution conservatrice dans l'édition*. In Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales 126;127: 2-28. It was translated in (2008) by Ryan Fraser as *A conservative revolution in publishing.* In *Translation Studies*, 1(2): 123-153.

Norah ALKHARASHI
Modern Arabic Fiction in English:
The Yacoubian Building; a Case in Point

CLINA
vol. 2-1, June 2016, 43-59
eISSN: 2444-1961
© Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca - CC BY-NC-ND

52

«literary» or «commercial» texts (*ibid*. 125). Bourdieu, however, states that those agents do not work autonomously. They operate within and are influenced by the «global structure» of the publishing field (*ibid*.). He defines this «global structure» as hierarchal global fields of languages and cultures, in which English tends to be privileged, since the economic model of the current publishing fields is the best environment for imperialism to survive (*ibid*. 151). However, the global structure of publishing is dynamic and unpredictable (Bourdieu 1999/2008 and Buzelin 2006). Thus, Buzelin (2006) and Kershaw (2009) find that it is important to revisit the findings in the field of publishing and book production to record the most recent trends and findings.

Scholars such as Casanova (2004), Buzelin (2006), and Heilbron and Sapiro (2007) have considered Bourdieu's theories when studying the role of translation and related social agents in international literary exchanges. For them, translation and related activities such as publishing are seen as parts of the interpretive act itself, having a major role in the international circulation of literary texts. The sociology of translation, for the very first time, provides translation theory with a methodology to consider the role of these important agents, allowing for the evaluation of the success and reception of translated literature without what Kershaw (2009: 4) calls «a naive view of art as a reflection of society».

Sociology of translation complements *polysystem* theory. Bourdieu offers a valuable sociological underpinning to the analysis of the specific functioning of the mechanisms of cultural exchange, something which *polysystem* theory has tended to address primarily at a textual level. *Polysystem* theory deals explicitly and in detail with the question of how translated fiction functions in the host culture, Bourdieu does not attempt to address this question, but his framework can nonetheless be used to answer it.

CASE STUDY: *THE YACOUBIAN BUILDING*

In order to apply theory to practice, I trace the journey of *Imarat Yaqubyan* (2002) by Alla Al Aswany and its English translation *The Yacoubian Building* (2004) by Humphrey Davies. I will be looking at the function of the translation in the English literary field. Drawing on Bourdieu's sociological theory of literary fields, I focus on the selection of the work, the role of the translator and editor, and the reception of the work. The data is collected from three sources:

1. Translators speaking about their experience in interviews published in literary forums, blogs and literary magazines
2. The English translation
3. Reviews and literary commentaries from literary and news magazines

The Yacoubian Building has been celebrated as a great commercial and literary success in the United States and the United Kingdom. It has been considered a best seller for a long period, with nine editions in Arabic and four in English so far. There are at least thirteen[14] reviews by major literary and non-literary magazines (2006-2010), to name a few: *The Independent*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Words Without Borders* and *The Telegraph*. In fact, *The Telegraph* provides two reviews published in the same year (2007). This unusual scenario raises the question of how Arabic fiction in English translation functions successfully in what is often described as «a competitive and closed market»[15]. Even-Zohar's *polysystem* theory (1990: 170) notes «the less international orientation of English literature and the peripheral position of translated literature within it». More recently, Büchler *et al.* (2011) found that when it comes to translated literature, the attitudes of English publishing and literary markets are «indifferent» and «self-sufficient». In order to account for this complexity, I address factors and agents during the translation process of *The Yacoubian Building.*

The novel's first appearance in English was in 2004 through the American University in Cairo Press (AUCP). This is a private non-commercial publishing house specialized in publishing English translation of Arabic literature since 1960, and is based in the Middle East. Two years later, Harper Perennial, a commercial publishing company based in New York, acquired the publishing and distribution rights. In an interview, Mark Linz, director and publisher of AUCP, suggests that Arabic literature enjoys more global visibility due to AUCP's «pioneer work when we decide to become the main publishers of Arabic literature in translation» (2013 1:12). The AUCP has created a system within the English literary polysystems in which Arabic fiction can be presented. Even-Zohar explains: «The polysystem is conceived as a heterogeneous, hierarchized conglomerate (or system) of systems which interact to bring about an ongoing dynamic process of evolution within the polysystem as a whole». In regard to Arabic literature, the English literary polysystem is dynamic and changing.

Nevertheless, the English literary system and norms are still central. It is elucidating in this regard to examine the choices made by translators and editors as active agents in the literary field during the translation process (Buzelin 2006). Humphrey (2010), an award winning Arabic translator originally from England, confirms that he is a mediator between the author's voice and good English. Thus, his choices are based on fulfilling this role. On the faithfulness of a translator, Humphrey states:

> If a translator doesn't aim to be faithful, I guess he should declare himself an author and not a translator. To me being faithful means translating in such a way that another

14   From http://www.complete-review.com.
15   Kershaw 2009 and 2013 analysis of French translation into English book market found that the English book market is closed and highly competitive compared to others.

person with knowledge of both languages can understand why the translator used those words, even if «black» is represented as «white».

This middle position between the two languages has a limit. Humphrey believes that «there must be a saturation level» to the foreign elements in the text. Since this study is not a comparison between stylistic choices, I will move to socio-cultural factors that were involved in producing this translation.

Success in the Arab World (the source culture) is an important factor for choosing a novel for translation, although that alone is not sufficient. According to Buzelin, publishing a translation is «[a] less risky enterprise as, upon making his/her decision, the publisher has some feedback to rely on: the reception of the original» (2006: 137). Similarly, Bourdieu insists that success is not guaranteed for the merits of the novel only, but is produced by the literary field in which it exists. The translation, therefore, must be examined sociologically:

> [T]he artist who makes the work is himself made, at the core of the field of production, by the whole ensemble of those who help to «discover» him and to consecrate him as an artist who is «known» and recognized—critics, writers of prefaces, dealers, etc. (Bourdieu 1999: 167)

The discourse created by the reviews is a valuable source of information. It helps to explain why publishers make their decisions more than any interview with a publisher can (Kershaw 2009). By examining the reviews published in the magazines I have previously mentioned, I have found that there are three themes that emerged: the controversial topics of political and social reforms, the acceptable literary and linguistic norms, and the analogy with Naguib Mahfouz. While the first two themes emerge from the text itself, the later comes from paratextual influence.

The topic of the novel is essential to the successful reception of the translation. *The Yacoubian Building* deals with controversial issues of political indignation, homophobia, sexism, Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. While these topics are attractive, relevant and provide interesting material for a story, they are also historically and culturally significant. The novel was published after 9/11 when a growing interest in Middle East politics and culture was witnessed.

> It seems to be mainly extra-literary factors that make publishers take an interest. In the case of Arabic literature, we have witnessed a sharp rise in interest in the Arab and Muslim world following the events of 9/11. Despite this, translation from Arabic largely remains the preserve of specialised publishers. (Büchler *et al.* 2011: 7)

Norah ALKHARASHI
Modern Arabic Fiction in English:
The Yacoubian Building; a Case in Point

CLINA
vol. 2-1, June 2016, 43-59
eISSN: 2444-1961
© Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca - CC BY-NC-ND

55

The English reviews tell us that *The Yacoubian Building* was valued in terms of acceptability and appropriateness, which reflects Toury's idea that when a translated work adheres to the norms of the target culture and the target literary polysystem as a whole, then it produces an acceptable target text (1995). *The New Yorker* values the novel in terms of its «smooth English translation» (Pierpont 2010). Similarly, *The Guardian* celebrates the fact that the novel's style resembles classical English writers:

> [The Yacoubian Building] portrays big-city characters, both ludicrous and tender, its warm heart and political indignation. It belongs to a literary tradition that goes back to the 1840s, to Eugène Sue and Charles Dickens. (Buchan 2007, A Street in the sky).

While these factors seem to be significant, no review mentions the literary value of the novel. Indeed, while the reviews recommend the novel because it is a «great piece of art» and «an act of literary pleasure» (*Words Without Borders* and *The New York Times*, respectively), they do not provide analytical or critical insights to the literary quality of the text. This is not a surprise, as Büchler *et al.* (2011: 45) find «reviews of Arabic literature, when they occur, are almost always fairly superficial and generally favourable».

All the consulted reviews mention Naguib Mahfouz and his Nobel Prize of 1988 in relation to Alla Al Aswany and *The Yacoubian Building*. It is a way to suggest that this novel is a *serious* book. Buzelin (2009) suggests that association between the translation product and major names in the publishing industry or literary fields increases the symbolic value of the book in question. It is considered a marketing method initiated by the media, and possibly taken up by the publisher. Interestingly, *The Yacoubian Building* has won many prizes from Italy (Grinzane Cavour Award, 2007), Austria (Bruno-Kriesky Award, 2008), Germany (Friedrich Award, 2008, and Johann Philipp Palm Award, 2012), and Canada (Blue Metropolis Award for Arabic Literature, 2011), but they are not mentioned in the reviews.

8. RAISE OF PROFILE

Translation of contemporary literature from Arabic into English is a relatively recent phenomenon. The analysis of *The Yacoubian Building* (2004) shows that the English literary market is not closed to translated fiction, including works from the Arab World. Said's postcolonial analytical framework may not offer the best current methodology to explain these phenomena. Translation theory, and in particular the *polysystem* theory of Even-Zohar and the sociology of translation as informed by Bourdieu's *literary fields* and *social agents*, shows us how a translated literary work functions in the target culture. The theory accounts for the «transfer» of properties, values and norms from

Norah ALKHARASHI
Modern Arabic Fiction in English:
The Yacoubian Building; a Case in Point

CLINA
vol. 2-1, June 2016, 43-59
eISSN: 2444-1961
© Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca - CC BY-NC-ND

56

one polysystem to another (Even-Zohar 1990: 25). Literary systems are changeable and dynamic, with varying central, dominant elements at any given place and time. As commonly known, Modern English literary systems tend to be self-sufficient and closed, thus foreign literature tends to enter the system as marginalized. But also the English literary system is also highly competitive and commercial, literary translation depends on public and private subsidies.

The sociology of translation, represented by the works of Bourdieu, provides a means to assess the role of social agents in literary systems, showing the role of publishers, reviewers and translators in the process of translation. It also addresses the ways in which value is ascribed to contemporary Arabic fiction in the current dynamic nature of cultural exchange: controversial topic, the analogies to Mahfouz's award 1988, and favourable comparisons to notable English authors in similar genres, all offer clues as to how a foreign work may gain a more central place in English polysystems.

The success of *The Yacoubian Building* is not in itself evidence of openness to contemporary Arabic literature in the English literary market. It is, however, evidence that the political and cultural context of a work's release, coupled with a good understanding by translators and publishers of the contemporary reader's expectations at a given time and place, can result in the critically and commercially favourable reception of Arabic literature in the English market.

9. REFERENCES

ADAMS, Lorraine. 2006. «Those who dwell therein». In *The New York Times* (review). Accessed November 29, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/27/books/review/Adams.t.html?_r=1&.

ADIL, Alev. 2007. «The yacoubian building, by Alaa Al Aswany, trans Humphrey Davies: home truths in Egypt's multi-story saga». In *The Independent* (article)*. Accessed November 29, 2014. http://www.independent.co.uk/artsentertainment/books/reviews/the-yacoubian-building-by-alaa-al-aswany-trans-humphrey-davies-436484.html.

AL Aswani, Alaa. 2004. *The Yacoubian Building.* [orig. Amaret Yaqubian]. Translated by Humphrey Davis. New York: Harper Perennial.

ALTOMA, Salih J. 2005. *Modern Arabic Literature in Translation: A Companion*. London: Saqi Books.

ASFOUR, Nana. 2007. «The Yacoubian Building». In *Words without Boarders* (review). Accessed November 29, 2014. http://wordswithoutborders.org/book-review/theyacoubian-building.

BOURDIEU, Pierre. 2008. «A Conservative Revolution in Publishing». *Translation Studies* 1 (2): 123-153.

BOOTH, Marilyn. 2008. «Translator v. Author (2007) Girls of Riyadh go to New York». *Translation Studies* 1(2): 197-211.

Norah ALKHARASHI
Modern Arabic Fiction in English:
The Yacoubian Building; a Case in Point

CLINA
vol. 2-1, June 2016, 43-59
eISSN: 2444-1961
© Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca - CC BY-NC-ND

57

BOOTH, Marilyn. 2010. «"The Muslim Woman" as Celebrity Author and the Politics of Translating Arabic: Girls of Riyadh Go on the Road». *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 6(3): 149-182.

BROWNLIE, Siobhan. 1999. «Investigating Norms». In *Translation and The (Re)Location of Meaning–Selected Papers of the CETRA Research Seminars in Translation Studies*, ed. by Jeroen Vandaele. Leuven, Belguim: CETRA, 7-21.

BÜCHLER, Alexandra, Alice Guthrie, Barbora Černá & Michal Karas. 2011. «Literary Translation from Arabic into English in the United Kingdom and Ireland, 1990-2010». *Literature Across Frontier*. Accessed September 12, 2014. http://www.lit-across_frontiers.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Literary-Translation-from-Arabic-into_English-in-the-United-Kingdom-and-Ireland-1990-2010-final.pdf.

BUZELIN, Hélène. 2006. «Independent Publisher in the Networks of Translation». *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 19(1): 135-173.

CASANOVA, Pascal. 2004. *The World Republic of Letters*. [orig. La République mondiale des lettres]. Translated by M. B. Debevoise. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

CLARK, Peter. 2000. «Arabic Literature Unveiled: Challenges of Translation». *Durham Middle East Paper, 63* (Winter). Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Durham. 1-27.

EVEN-ZOHAR, Itmar. 1978/1990. «The Position of Translated Literature Within the Literary Polysystem». In *The Translation Studies Reader* 2002, ed. by Lawrence Venuti. London and NewYork: Routledge, 192-197.

GENTZLER, Edwin. 2001. *Contemporary Translation Theories*. UK: Multilingual Matters (Topics in Translation, 21).

HEILBRON, Johan & Gisèle Sapiro. 2007. «Outline for a Sociology of Translation» (Trans. by Susan Emanuel). *Constructing a Sociology of Translation,* ed. by Michaela Wolf. Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 93-107.

HERMANS, Theo. 1999. *Translation in Systems*. Manchester: St. Jerome.

KERSHAW, Angela. 2007. «Finding Irène Némirovsky». *French Cultural Studies* 18(1): 59-81.

JABRA, Jabra I. 1971. «Modern Arabic literature and the West». *Journal of Arabic Literature* 2: 76-91.

JACQUEMOND, Richard.1992. «Translation and Cultural Hegemony: The case of French-Arabic translation». In *Rethinking Translation,* ed. by Lawrence Venuti. London and New York: Routledge, 139-158.

JOHNSON-DAVIS, Dynes. 2006. *Memories in Translations*. New York: The American University in Cairo Press.

MUNIF, Abd al-Rahman. 1987. *Cities of salt*. [orig. Mudun Al Milh]. Translated by Peter Theroux. New York: Random House.

NAWOTKA, Edward. 2013. «Mark Linz: One Man We Can Thank for Opening Arabic Lit to the West». *Publishing Perspective* (article). Accessed November 29, 2014. http://publishingperspectives.com/2013/02/mark-linz-the-man-we-can-thank-for-opening-arabic-lit-to-the-west/.

PIERPONT, Claudia R. 2010. «Found in Translation: The Contemporary Arabic Novel». *The New Yorker* (article). Accessed November 29, 2014. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/01/18/found-in-translation-2?printable=true&currentPage=all.

Norah ALKHARASHI
Modern Arabic Fiction in English:
The Yacoubian Building; a Case in Point

CLINA
vol. 2-1, June 2016, 43-59
eISSN: 2444-1961
© Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca - CC BY-NC-ND

58

QUALEY, M. Lynx. 2009. «The Humphrey Davies Interview». *Quarterly Convention* (interview). Accessed November 29, 2014. http://quarterlyconversation.com/the-humphrey-davies-interview.

ROOKE, Tetz. 2004. «Autobiography, Modernity and Translation». In *Cultural Encounters in Translation from Arabic*, ed. by Said Faiq. Clevedon, Buffalo & Toronto: Multilingual Matters LTD, 40-50.

SAID, Edward. 1978/1980. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

SAID, Edward. 1990. «Embargoed literature». *The Nation* 17(1): 278-280.

SALIH, Tayeb. 2003. *Season of Migration to the North.* [orig. *Mawsim al-Hiǧra ilā ash-Shamāl*]. Translated by Denys Johnson-Davis. New York: Penguin.

SAPIRO, Gisèle. 2008. «Translation and the Field of Publishing: A Commentary on Pierre Bourdieu's "A conservative revolution in publishing"». *Translation Studies* 1(2): 154-166.

TORRESI, Ira. 2013. «The Polysystem and the Postcolonial: The Wondrous Adventures of James Joyce and his Ulysses across book markets». *Translation Studies* 6(2): 217-231.

THREE Percent: A Resource for International Literature at the University of Rochester. http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepercent.

VAN LEEUWEN, Richard. 2004. «The Cultural Context of Translating Arabic Literature». In *Cultural Encounters in Translation from Arabic*, ed*.* by Said Faiq. Clevedon, Buffalo & Toronto: Multilingual Matters LTD, 14-25.

WOLF, Michaela & Alexandra FUKARI. 2007. *Constructing a Sociology of Translation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing (Translation Library, 74).

Norah ALKHARASHI
Modern Arabic Fiction in English:
The Yacoubian Building; a Case in Point

CLINA
vol. 2-1, June 2016, 43-59
eISSN: 2444-1961
© Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca - CC BY-NC-ND

59