

A Portrait of the Translator as a Political Activist

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Abstract

This paper attempts to portray the role of the translator as a political activist. It studies the character of the translator Mansur Abd As-Salam in Abd Ar-Rahman Munif's 1973 novel *Al-Ashjaar wa Igtiyaal Marzouq* (The Trees and the Assassination of Marzouq)¹. In addition to emphasizing the sociopolitical characterization of the translator in this important Arabic novel, the paper focuses on the professional context(s) Abd As-Salam is set in and on parallels between the narratives of the author and the character of the translator. The concluding point that the researcher draws is that translation replaces writing and helps to secure a haven for endangered people who indulge in political activism though it is depicted as marginal and secondary as far as the original professions of those people is concerned.

Key Words: Translation, Political Activism, Translator's Narrative, Author's Narrative

1. Introduction : The Translator in Fiction

The novel can be said to be our best means to understand ourselves and the world through other people being characterized. As the highest form of narrative discourse, it "serves as the model by which society conceives of itself, the discourse in and through which it

articulates the world" (Culler, 1975:189). In taking the argument to its farthest end, Culler contends that word composition will give access to different kinds of models: "...a model of the social world, models of the individual personality, of the relations between the individual and society, and, perhaps most important, of the kind of significance which these aspects of the world can bear" (ibid.). As such, it is thought that the study of narratives can yield a better understanding of the nature of things.

Apart from the cases in which authors translate their own works or those in which they intervene in the translating process, the character of the translator in fictional works is no strange². In instancing the "historical marginality of women", Apple (2003:28), for instance, considers the protagonists of different novels who work as translators. In Nicole Mones's novel *Lost in Translation*, Alice who lives and works as a translator in China, is seemingly an independent woman, yet she lives on cheques piped by her father, "The demeaning reality of the situation shames both of them to the point that neither father nor daughter even mentions the cheques that he regularly sends to keep her afloat" (ibid.). Another example is Gloria Harrison, a gifted translator, in Julia Kristeva's novel *Possessions*. Unlike Alice who lives on money from her father, Gloria lives on her family's status and wealth (ibid.).

Translation, a profession highly involving readings and the application of the intellectual capacity, has always been looked upon inferiorly: as a mechanical and derivative profession. Alice's fictional

lover seems to think so: “She was so intelligent, so perceptive. Why had she not aimed higher?” (ibid.). Of course, this implies higher than translation. In Sarah Dunant’s novel *Transgressions*, the translator Lizzie—psychologically broken by a lover— accepts to translate a long, hard-boiled thriller by a new Czech writer only because she had no better choices and chances. Despite her reservations on the originality of the work, Lizzie accepted “... partly because the money was good and partly because living in another language would allow her to live less in herself ...” (ibid.).

Now what do Alice, Gloria and Lizzie tell us about translation? What do they, as characters, attempt to conceptualize? The answer to these questions is self-evident. The characters, as I see them, enforce the everlasting stereotypes on translation, namely those of the translator's dependence (on money, wealth and original works). Lizzie's case is especially interesting in that it adds the issue of spiritual and psychological dependence . Though lacking complete satisfaction in the originality of the work, she intends to translate the 'Czech' novel mainly because translation, as an intellectual process and a financial project, provides a psychological outlet and escapism. Personally, I think the associations of the length, quality, non accomplishment and non originality of the Czech work together with the themes of Englishness (author's name: Sara Dunant, Novel's title : *Transgression*, absence of satisfaction and *other* language) enhance one of the most recurrent narratives of the superiority-inferiority relationship controlling the contexts in which translators and authors occupy.

2. The Narrative of the Author

Abd Ar-Rahman Munif (1933 - 2004) was one of the most important 20th century Arab novelists. He is most celebrated for closely reflecting the sociopolitical surroundings of his day and of his nation. Munif was born in Amman in 1933 to a Saudi father and Iraqi mother. His Saudi citizenship was revoked in 1963 because of his political activities. Before moving to Cairo, he was expelled three times during his study of law at Baghdad University. He received a law degree from the Sorbonne and in 1961 a Ph.D. in oil economics from the University of Belgrade. Munif spent the following years in Syria and Lebanon. In 1975, he left Lebanon because of the civil war and returned to Iraq to work as an editor of *Al-Naft wa Al-Tanmiyah* magazine (Oil and Development Magazine) of the ministry of oil. It is significant to mention that Munif rose to senior positions in the Iraqi branch of Baath Party, but it were his left-wing views which brought his downfall as they were at odds with Michel Aflaq - the party founder (www.boston...). Munif left Iraq in 1981 and after spending some five years in France, he settled in Syria.

He began writing only in the 1970s after he had left his job with the ministry of oil. quit the Ba'ath party, and as such he severed bonds with a regime he opposed. Munif lived in Syria since the late 1980s, and was granted Syrian citizenship. Very soon, he became known for his souring parodies of Middle Eastern elites, especially those of Saudi Arabia, a country which banned many of his books. Munif

made the most of his knowledge of the oil industry to sail into both the technical and political administration.

Munif's acclaimed *Sharq Al-Mutawasit* (East of the Mediterranean) (1975) portrays the horrors of torture carried out in Arab prisons. He announces that "a human being in the lands east of the Mediterranean is cheaper than anything and a cigarette stub has more value than him" (Jiad, 2004: www). As a result, he firmly takes the stance that any complacency, appeasement and or even silence is a kind of complicity (ibid.).

In *An-Nihayaat* (The Ends) (1977), Munif describes his 'personal' narrative of the torture and suffering he endured as a political prisoner. Although the place is unnamable, as it is in most of his novels, it is believed to be in Saudi Arabia (www.boston...). According to Munif, the non-definability of the place serves a generalizing function "As far as the exact definition of the place, this doesn't mean much to me for one major reason—the difference between one place and another is relative, marginal, and insignificant. If, for example, we discuss the political prison in a confined place such as Iraq or Saudi Arabia, it seems as if I am exonerating other places or as if the political prison does not exist in these places, especially when we know the political prison exists from the Atlantic to the Gulf to be exact, whether in terms of its environment, means, or concerns" (Habash, 2003 : www).

Munif's magnum opus is the *Mudun Al-Milh* (Cities of Salt) (1981-1989), a quintet that followed the evolution of the Arabian Peninsula from a land of Bedouin nomads to a rich and powerful kleptocracy.

The novel has brought the writer a balanced weight of critical acclaim and resentment "since it dismantled the very principles on which tribal societies were based" (Al-Rostamani, 2004 : www). One can safely say that no other Arab novelist had the guts to take such a detailed and penetrating look at the psychological and sociological impact of oil on a community.

These novels as well as subsequent fiction and non-fiction works denounce oppression and call for democracy in the Arab world. Moreover, they criticize the hypocrisy of the West in preaching freedom and human rights while remaining complicit with repressive regimes. During this period Munif became disenchanted with the Iraqi brand of Baathism and "...friends recall Munif saying as early as 1978 that the Iraqi regime was no better than the Saudi" (Anis, 2004 : www). He thought of co-authoring a novel with the Iraqi poet Saadi Yousif, but Yousif had to flee Iraq for fear of being subjected to the same kind of horrors portrayed in *East of the Mediterranean* (ibid.).

Though Munif was well-aware of the agonies of thought prisoners in that he claimed "Every human being could turn into becoming a prisoner or a candidate to being part of a prison cell", he showed sympathy to both prisoner and prosecutor alike "At a moment in time, I come to the realization that the victim and the prosecutor are two faces of the same coin: both are victims of the system that is in control" (Al-Rostamani,2004:www). He diagnosed the real cause of the problem as the deafness and backwardness characterizing the ruling classes. Therefore he believed in standing by the "downtrodden, the abused and the oppressed, and not to allow ourselves to become

instruments in the hands of the ruling classes, or the mouthpieces of the rich, or the servants of the foreign circles that would have us remain backward (Munif 2004 : www).

His diagnosis reveal another important factor in the Arab life and he sees it as the holy duty of the novel to address it. This factor is the other side or better be called the secret side of Arab life. Sex, politics, religion and injustices are regarded as Arab taboos. He says:

Arab society is one of the strangest of all societies because it practises all manner of things secretly, and yet it fears if a single word, no matter how indirect, should be said or written about this secret life. It is the task of the novel to head straight to this secret life in order to try to expose it and exhort people in a resonant voice to be brave and confess. If the writer, particularly the novelist, submits to this general hypocrisy and resorts to concealment when everything is known to others, then this would be a form of complicity and acquiescence (ibid).

Munif hoped to formulate through writing a new life that is not reigned by taboos (Al-Rostamani, 2004,www). He was convinced that remedies can never be effective unless the novel is all healthy and courageous "The more courageous the novel, regardless of its subject matter, the more it can shake rotten roots, clean away thick layers of dust and become an instrument of discovery, knowledge and freedom" (Munif,2004).

His historical novel *Ard Al-Sawad* (Land of Darkness) (1999) describes Iraq in early 19th century. In Munif's words the novel is "a

love song to the people of Iraq and their struggle against all hazards" (Anis, 2004 : www). Individual suffering now takes a collective turn, i.e. people replace the individual characters "Thus the novel deals with all that hinders people from venturing towards new horizons and all that forces them to accept the unacceptable. In this sense the novel is as much a contemplation of history, and of man and the unequal relations that stand between men, as it is a contribution to the creation of a more progressive consciousness to counteract all that stands in way of humanity" (Mounif, 2000 :www).

While Munif severely criticized Saddam Hussein and his regime, he utterly opposed the American-led invasion of Iraq and spent his last two years working on non-fiction projects to oppose what he saw as renewed imperialism. His wife Suaad Qwadri comments on the project saying "He had a strong desire to complete the work... What happened to Iraq was so painful to him" (www.boston.com). In his non-fiction work *Al-Iraq : Hawamish min al-Tarikh wa al-Moqawama* (Iraq: Footnotes on History and Resistance) 2004, Munif is busily engaged in invigorating "...the historical memory in Iraq at a time when the history of the Iraqi people is itself being wiped out by foreign occupation in order to facilitate what Munif called 'the history of the victors' " (Anis, 2004 :www).

An influential factor underlying his metamorphosis as a writer was the time in which he had grown. It was a time of tribulations coupled with aspirations for a better Arab life. This may explain his change of positions, from a despair of political activism into writing:

I came to fiction-writing quite late in life, turning to it after I grew weary of the politics of the time. I came to the novel as a political refugee, almost certain that this was a whim, a brief respite after which I would return, once again, to politics, to changing the world. But as I was to realize quite quickly, my late arrival to the novel was not a mistake, because fiction-writing, like all other mediums of expression, calls for life experience, including sometimes experience of failure, and my own political experience had taught me a great deal about that (Mounif, 2004 : www)³.

But as he goes on, we come to know that fiction-writing was never a whim.

Munif's works were consistently spurred by political and individual principles. He lived through a plethora of political setbacks such as the 1948 and 1967 events in the long Arab-Israeli conflict and the issue of human rights in the Arab World. The novelist directly admits that political setbacks were behind his own choice and among the reasons that led to the popularity of fiction-writing in the Arab world "Among the reasons why the Arab novel has emerged as the prime medium of expression is the great defeats that begun in 1948... This is why I turned my attention from the start to political detention as one of the symbols of the times, then to petroleum as the curse that has enveloped Arab reality in its entirety from the Ocean to the Gulf, and which continues to expose us on a daily basis to punishments of various kinds" (ibid.)⁴.

Munif turned to believe in the novel as his best means of changing harsh realities . He contends "Even the desire to change the world is

conditioned by it, for one of its criteria is that the novel should exist, that it should be sound, and that the world should be discovered and understood anew through the novel as a prelude to effecting change"(ibid.). He envisioned the novel as a tool with a moral duty "Even the subject-matter of the novel—any novel—is often no more than a cause, a *raison d'être*, for the novel to continue" (ibid.).

3. The Narrative of the Translator

In the very beginning of the novel, we are introduced to an unidentified character who decides to leave his country. The character is indulged in checking and rechecking his travel documents, and particularly the passport which he waited for two complete years to be issued! After ascertaining that everything is all right, he reads the instructions in Arabic and French, reflects on some words and in a way agrees on the translation (p.13)⁵. It is evident here that the translator reacts passively against official translation which is usually done by non-qualified clerks in passport and other Arab governmental offices.

The second chapter unfolds the focal character of the novel. It is Mansur Abd As-Salam, a university lecturer in History, a graduate of Brussels University, who is released from his job for political activism. As such, translation is not the essential profession of Abd As-Salam, and this is affirmed in other ways, and it is envisioned only as an outlet:

- I have only few hours left in this country. Then I will leave it! I will never return once again. Yes, I will never return...I will fit in with my new job, and in case I am fired, ***I will find another...*** (p.17.Emphasis added).

- I turned, in this way, from an unemployed person into a translator... from a lecturer in contemporary history into something in the world of relics and past!.. ***I was ready to be a doorman, a porter, a ticket-seller. The important thing is to get out of this bloody country, and to find work.*** (p.25. Emphasis added).

Politically, Abd As-Salam believes in the very aspirations of the author in that he hopes of reconstructing anew his own world (but in violent means):

- Oh, if only I reigned, only for one day, I had destroyed this world. The world needs nothing but destruction. Everything got rotten, decayed. It can never be reclaimed. It must be completely destroyed and a new world is to be built on its remnants...(p.27).

- This world needs exploding. If I had an atomic bomb, I would have never hesitated using it. Thanks to Allah I do not possess one. (p.165).

On page (164), Abd As-Salam is interrogated at the departure checkpoint, and the dialogue that goes on between the two sides reveal a number of interesting aspects about the provocative officers, profession, official translation and unkind treatment. He potently voices out the situation of the translator in repressive systems of

administration in that only approved off translators are allowed to work with foreign companies and agencies :

When they entered, they looked at me with scathing irony. I was suspected and guilty in their eyes. I was a smuggler. They took the passport, thumbed it through and looked at me from head to feet. The tall blond man asked me:

- Traveling for tourism or work?

- Work

- What's your profession?

((What's my profession? Shall I say an archaeologist? A translator? Why hadn't I asked myself this question before? But isn't it recorded in the passport: a past clerk. What does it mean "a past clerk"? A retired or released? Words never mean anything. They must ask...))

- A translator!

((How ugly is the language of orientalists and court clerks. They say lots of unnecessary things!)).

- A translator?

- Yes, with an archaeology mission.

- Archaeology? Do you have a permit?

- yes

((Do they issue a passport without a permit? Don't they know how long I waited to get this damn permit?))

Abd As-Salam's dissatisfaction with the way history is written, i.e. that it is possible to write on the dead rather than on the alive ruling classes, is projected on his dissatisfaction with being thrown again in paper work. Rather than translating, he prefers to share men in the mission their excavation:

In few days I'll work again, but this time I want to work with my both hands. I'll catch the axe and dig. I'll have my face and hands smell of soil. I'll wear an old suit, and work from dawn to sunset.... During the first period, I'll stick to instructions. I'll not behave against their will, but through days, I'll do the work that suits me more. We'll be all in the site, chatting and working, together.(p.258).

During the unemployment period and feeling the heavy debts to friends, Abd As-Salam begin to think of translating as a financial project that can rescue him "During this period, I found that the best way to survive is to translate. I wonder why I hadn't thought of it since a long time. If I began translating, I might be able to produce some three or four books this year. Every book equals one year work at university. This means I'll be rich. All who work in translation are rich. They weren't rich before. Within a few years they changed from ordinary people to famed and rich people" (pp. 281-282).

Abd As-Salam's process of selecting books for translation is both interesting and contradictory. The process was by drawing a lot on a number of books. As this reflects indeterminacy and unawareness, the winning book reflects a deep activist tendency "I chose a book by lot... yes you have to believe it. After getting puzzled for a long time, I decided to choose a book by drawing a lot from the seven books I chose. That book I chose was a new cause for the ill-luck that accompanies me. Simply, the book was "Paris Commune". I worked day and night on it. I smoked uncountable number of cigarettes. I reflected for long on choosing elegant words, and when it finished, I had a happy feeling which I have never tasted in my life...." (p.282).

It must be pointed out that the outlook of translation as a financial project and the selection issue run across Abd As-Salam's clearly defined positions below.

Through detailing some of the viewpoints of publishers about his translated book "Paris Commune", Abd As-Salam is in fact exposing his own plight as a political activist. The first publisher absolutely refuses the book because as he claims he is busy with publishing school textbooks. The second publisher, however, commends on the quality of the book, but refrains from publishing it saying simply that is unmarketable these days, and thus will not risk publishing it. The Third publisher is more interesting. "He thumbed through my face more than the book", Abd As-Salam says in page (282). After spending two weeks for his opinion on the book, the publisher apologizes for commercial and authorities related reasons. He suggests "What about translating "A thousand and One Nights" into French Mr. Mansur? Isn't it better?"⁶ (P.283). The advisor of the fourth publisher replies "It's probable that authorities will not approve of publishing it" (P.283). When Abd As-Salam tries the authorities, the reply is affirmatively negative.

Now it's about time Abd As-Salam poured out his criticism "Books pile up like hills...speaking of sexual adulteries, Napoleon's concubines, and..., and... . All are approved, but the translation of the poor guy Mansur is not" (P.284). Cornering Abd As-Salam in such desperate situation does not weaken his spirits. He responds saying "By God, even If I died starving, I would not do what you like me to

do ! It's true that I am unable to resist, but I will never be the one you like!..." (P.284).

4. Conclusion

The establishment of the model(s), which Culler spoke about in page (1), can be said to be based on the author's character, other (close and distant) characters and the world around. Drawing upon the personal experience of the author is the starting point. The personal tones, however, become the subject of a series of change, adaptation and are nourished by imagination. They can never be completely erased.

Commenting on the novel's authentic representation of real events, Al-Rostamani (ibid.) says "One such novelist whose characters Marzouq in *The Trees* and the Assassination of Marzouq and Mit'eb Al Hathaal of *Cities of Salt*, probes us to wonder the extent to which they resemble us". In an interview with Munif, he confesses that there is in every work some varying degrees of the author's character "It is possible to distinguish between two things: the novel and other writings. In the novel, there is a role or impact, albeit a small one. But as far as the subject of the novel, its characters, and life story, I am convinced that every author has some of himself in what he writes, and this is distributed in varying degrees and forms among the characters" (Habash, 2003:www).

If we examine parallelisms between the narratives of the author and the translator, we first find the interest in the intellectual. Both

Munif and Abd As-Salam are PhD holders, the first in oil economics and the second in modern history. Abd As_Salam, however, is distinguished by being made a translator (see Habash for Munif's views on the intellectuals in the Third World). While Munif's Saudi citizenship is stripped (a common practice in the third World. Let's remember the renowned Iraqi poets Muhammed Mehdi Al-Jawahiri and Abdul-Wahab Al-Bayyati in Saddam Hussein's era), Abd As-Salam was able to obtain a passport after two years of questioning and monitoring.

The political activism of the translator is clearly manifested in the criticisms which Abd As-Salam directs against commercialisms and classicisms in translation. By exposing the viewpoints of the different publishers, he is reacting against their very concept of looking at the book as any other commodity. Equally important is his rejection of translating the classic and best-selling book "A Thousand and one Nights", and official translation.

Munif's leftist views are reflected in the translator's reading list of books, namely The Thought of Carl Marx, Ibn Khaldoun's Introduction, The Lost Generation, Excavating the Past, the Misers...etc. His choice of translating "Paris Commune" intensely reflects the activism of both author and translator. It is because of this political activism that the books of both were jarred from publication, the author's in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries and the translator in the fictional world. Interestingly, the metamorphosis from the position of activism in writing to activism through translation is noted in the works of As-Sayyab and Pasternak. The first, an Iraqi

poet (1924-1964), resorted to translating chapters of *The God that Failed* and some (25) poems for different advanced poets when he was at odds with the Iraqi Communist Party and the Iraqi authorities (Al-Ali,1999: 69 & 71 respectively). The Russian poet Boris Pasternak is said to have translated *Hamlet* as a weapon in his struggle against political censorship and contemporary political Soviet literary conventions (Kuskova, n.d.: www).

* The author is indebted to Prof. Mona Baker for exposition and clarification of many aspects of the relation between translation and activism during the 2005 TRSS held at the University of Manchester.

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Endnotes

¹ Arabic proper nouns are transliterated variously according to individual preferences. The novelist's name in question can be translated into Abd Ar-Rahman Munif, Abdul Rahman Munif, Abdel Rahman Mounif, etc. Attention should be drawn that the author has used his own transliterations in this manuscript.

¹ See for instance Haruna Jiyah Jacob's (2002) "African Writers as Practising Translators". *Translation Journal*. Vol 6, No.4.<http://acurapid.com/journal/22kououma.htm>.

1 "*Munif*: My great gamble was in politics, but after I experimented with political activism, it became apparent that the available political methods were insufficient and unsatisfactory. As a result, I started the search for a formula to connect with others and to express their concerns and the concerns of the historical period and the generation. Given my hobby of reading, especially the novel, I thought that my reading and command of expression would enable me to substitute one tool with another. Instead of the political party or direct political action, it was possible for the novel to be a means of expression. This is why I came to the novel " (Habash, 2004:www)

¹ This concept of the potentiality of the novel to wield influence on the masses is also noted in the Chinese literature and is attributed to foreigners through the publications they introduced into China (Yuan Jin,1982:667).

¹ All references in this section are made to the novel, and translations are carried out by the author.

¹ Rather than using titles with surnames, it is a common practice in Arabic that people are called by their first names following the suitable title .

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