The Translator

ISSN: 1355-6509 (Print) 1757-0409 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtrn20

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The Arab translator as hero

Ferial J. Ghazoul

To cite this article: Ferial J. Ghazoul (2015) The Arab translator as hero, The Translator, 21:2, 154-172, DOI: 10.1080/13556509.2015.1069040

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2015.1069040

Published online: 21 Sep 2015.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 381

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rtrn20

Download by: [American University in Cairo] **Date:** 15 October 2017, At: 05:53

The Translator, 2015
Vol. 21, No. 2, 154–172, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2015.1069040

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The Arab translator as hero

Ferial J. Ghazoul*

English and Comparative Literature, The American University in Cairo, Egypt

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

The article examines fiction where the protagonist is an Arab translator to explore the significance of centralizing the role of the translator and what theoretical implications about translation can be extracted from such works. The image of the translator varies in these works from that of a tragic hero, a romantic hero, an ironic hero, a collaborating hero, a comic hero, and an impotent hero. Whereas all these works discuss translation and what it implies for cultural exchange and encounters, the emphasis is on fidelity versus creative license in the process of translation. These concepts invariably relate to power since fidelity is governed by a prior text where the translator is captive to wording while in creative rendering the translator is on equal footing with the author and may accomplish a text parallel to the source. The underlying power dimension and the failure of translators in these works point obliquely to the anxiety of intellectuals in the face of authority.

Keywords: fictional turn; translator fiction; J.L. Borges; L. Aboulela; M.I. al-Sagr; I. Kachachi; F. Haddad; A. Mamdouh

> *[I]n the work of some fiction writers I see enacted not only the way in which translation can work but also the ways in which it can affect the translator … I would suggest that the translator … can be read literally as well as metaphorically.*
>
> –Carol Maier 2006, 18

The so-called 'fictional turn' in translation studies follows the rich corpus of fictional writing in which reflections on the process of translation are explored, in seminal works such as those of Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Julio Cortázar and Umberto Eco, among others. As Adriana Pagano (2002, 97) remarks, 'The fictional turn in translation studies … explores the most profound relationships with cultural identity, memory, and tradition'. Both the 'fictional turn' and 'translator fiction' have been studied from the perspective of (post)modernity and western culture:

> [M]ajor developments help account for the debut of the translator as literary character and representative figure in the postwar period. The first is the internationalization of literature, which grows with modernism and intensifies in the decades after the Second World War. The most striking factor in the internationalization of writing has been political: legions of writers have been driven from their lands by war, revolution, and racism. (Thiem 1995, 208–209)

In this article, I examine translator fiction with a specific focus on Arab translators as protagonists. Most of the selected works are written by Arabs and are relatively recent, but I also include a short story by Borges first published in 1947 as an exemplary case of an Arab translator. My aim is to figure out what each translator–protagonist stands for and

*Email: fghazoul@aucegypt.edu

© 2015 Taylor & Francis

why he or she has moved from the periphery to the centre of such fiction. The works I have selected are either written in Arabic (Mahdi 'Issa al-Sagr's *Riyah Sharqiyya..Riyah Gharbiyya* (1998) [*East Winds, West Winds* (2010)], Inaam Kachachi's *Al-Hafida al-Amrikiyya* (2008) [*The American Granddaughter* (2010)], Fawwaz Haddad's (2008) *Al-Mutarjim al-Kha'in* [The Treacherous Translator] and Alia Mamdouh's (2007) *Al-Tashahhi* [Craving]); or written in English by an Arab author (Leila Aboulela's 1999 *The Translator*); or written by a non-Arab but featuring an Arab translator as a protagonist (Borges' 1979 'La busca de Averroes' ['Averroes' Search']).

The translator as tragic hero

In Jorge Luis Borges' (1967, 1979) short story entitled 'La busca de Averroes' ('Averroes' Search'), the protagonist is a translator, whose full name is Abu-al-Walid Muhammad ibn-Ahmad ibn-Rushd.[1] The narrator explains that the name had many forms before it became Averroes: Benraist, Avenryz, Aben-Rassad and Filius Rosadis.[2] This litany of names foreshadows the continuously evolving theme of the story: translation, as it moves from one culture to another, simultaneously becomes different and remains the same. The issue of identity and naming is planted in the first sentence of the Borgesian narrative.

The story presents the endeavours of Ibn Rushd in translating Aristotle's *On Poetics* and his inability to imagine what Aristotle could have meant by the different genres of dramatic performance, as they are not part of his culture. Thus, he ends up rendering Tragedy as *madih* (panegyric) and Comedy as *hija'* (satire). Ibn Rushd did not know Greek, so he was translating from Arabic translations that were themselves translated from Syriac (see 'Ayyad 1967; Butterworth 1986). The Borgesian short story depicts imaginary discussions and scenes from the life of the Hispano-Arab philosopher Ibn Rushd (1126–1198) in Cordoba around the period when he was involved in translation. Borges elaborates on Ibn Rushd's mental state and bewilderment over Aristotle's two technical terms. Eventually, in his translation, Ibn Rushd ends up providing Arabic terms drawn from subgenres of lyrics that he thinks correspond to the Greek genres of drama.[3] What I find significant in the narrative is precisely how Ibn Rushd fails to find a meaningful rendering of the Aristotelian text in the target language, and how that very failure is the essence of tragedy. Like all tragedies, there is no alternative finale, given the personality of the tragic hero.

Having translated the terms of Tragedy and Comedy as Panegyric and Satire, Ibn Rushd adds: 'Aristu (Aristotle) calls panegyrics by the name of tragedy and anathemas he calls comedies. The Koran abounds in remarkable tragedies and comedies, and so do the *mohalacas* of the sanctuary' ('Averroes' Search,' trans. Kerrigan, 109). Thus, Borges (1967) succeeds in showing us what a tragedy is, as exemplified in Ibn Rushd's failure. He succeeds equally in highlighting the absurd aspect of this misreading and mistranslation, as when Ibn Rushd reads tragedies and comedies in the Qur'an and, in the poetic legacy of the Arabs, the *mohalacs* (*mu'allaqat)* – the Arabic odes.

The tragic flaw of Ibn Rushd is his 'blindness' – very much like the blind camel that stands for destiny in the pre-Islamic ode of Zuhair mentioned in the story. A debate over this metaphor is discussed in a literary séance in Cordoba. Some feel that such metaphors drawn from Bedouin life and the desert are outdated and have no place in twelfth-century Cordoba or Damascus:

> Abdal-malik . . . argues the convenience of renovating the ancient metaphors; he stated that at the time Zuhair compared Destiny with a blind camel, this figure of speech could move

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

> people to astonishment, but that five centuries of wonder had exhausted the surprise. ('Averroes' Search', trans. Kerrigan, 107)

Ibn Rushd deconstructs this argument and refutes it rationally and systematically, demonstrating a certain clinging to the traditional rather than welcoming the innovative:

> What was said in that verse will not ever be said better ... When Zuhair composed his verse in Araby, it served to bring two images face to face: the image of the old camel and the image of Destiny. Repeated now, it serves to evoke the memory of Zuhair and to fuse our regrets with those of the dead Arabian. ('Averroes' Search', trans. Kerrigan, 108)[4]

What is fascinating is not only the inability to understand the cultural Other, the Greek, in the case of Ibn Rushd's translation, but also the blindness that prevents the translator from grasping his very own popular culture. When puzzled by the two literary terms, Ibn Rushd searches his books to find their meanings:

> He [...] went over to the book shelf where the many volumes of the *Mohkam*, composed by blind Abensida and copied by Persian calligraphers, stood in a row. ... He looked down over the railed balcony; below, in the narrow earthen patio, some half-clad boys were playing. One of them, standing on the shoulders of another, was obviously acting the part of the muezzin; with his eyes closed tight he chanted *There is no god but God*. The boy who sustained him, unmoving, was the minaret. A third, abjectly on his knees in the dust, was the congregation of the Faithful ... Averroes heard them arguing in *gross* dialect: that is the incipient Spanish of the Peninsula's Moslem plebs. ('Averroes' Search', trans. Kerrigan, 102–103).

The metaphorical blindness of Averroes is due to the fact that he is unable to see and grasp what is around him; he is more interested in his books, seeking answers to the puzzling terms in his ivory tower rather than attempting to understand what the 'plebs' are doing. Trusting his elite, book-based scholarship impedes his seeing the parallel between the vernacular game and theatrical performances about which he read in Aristotle's works or hearing about them from the traveller who visits Chinese Canton. The tragedy becomes that of a translator–scholar who derives his knowledge from bookish sources and disdains learning from life around him, with its rich and diverse popular scenes.

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

The translator as romantic hero

In Aboulela's novel, *The Translator*, Sammar – a Sudanese translator – is literally engaged in a labour of love when translating. She translates for Rae, a British professor specialising in Middle Eastern politics, and is also in love with him. Translation itself bridges the chasm between the secular leftist professor and the Muslim assistant who translates for him. There is an intellectual dialogue between them and they complement each other as they discuss cultural and linguistic issues.

However, the emotional ties are fragile as he does not believe in her faith and she is unable to commit herself to someone who does not share her faith. But as she develops, she gives up on wanting him to become a Muslim in order to qualify as a husband for a Muslim woman; she wants him to convert and find the truth of Islam for his own sake, not her own. On the other hand, years after throwing Sammar out when she proposes marriage and thus conversion, Rae ends up taking up the Islamic faith, and one guesses they live happily ever after—a somewhat contrived finale. But in Steiner's view, there is poetic justice in the ending for:

> "In refusing a tragic ending for her story, Aboulela portrays counter-acculturation, culminating in Rae's conversion to Islam, and it is through this conversion that translates asymmetrical power relations in this novel. Writing a story in which the white man returns to the African woman on her terms certainly addresses dominant discourses of gender and race." (62)

Sammar, a young widow who lost her husband Tarig in a car accident in Scotland, left her son with her in-laws in Sudan and is working in Aberdeen as a translator for Rae,[5] where the cultural aspects of translation are as important in the unfolding of the narrative as the linguistic ones. In a telephone conversation, Sammar tells Rae that she found a translation of the Sacred Sayings (*Hadith Qudsi*) with an introduction that explains how they differ from the Qur'an. As he is interested in the subject matter of these Sayings, she begins to explain the difference between *Hadith Qudsi* and the Qur'an according to al-Jurjani, 'A Sacred Hadith is, as to its meaning, from Allah the Almighty; as to the wording, it is from the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him' and al-Qari, 'Unlike the Holy Qur'an, Sacred Hadith are not acceptable for recitation in one's prayers … and they are not characterized by the attribute of inimitability' (Aboulela 1999, 36–37).

When Sammar reads one of those Sacred *Hadith* to Rae, he asks her if she would have translated it the same way as the book does. She then tells him that even in the book there is a footnote pointing to an alternative translation of one of the Sacred *Hadith* pronounced by the Prophet. The body of the text reads: '*Allah Almighty says: I am as My servant thinks I am*', while in the margin it is '… I am as My servant expects Me to be' (Aboulela 1999, 37). Sammar comments that the translation in the footnote is closer to the Arabic, as the key word means 'expects, thinks, even speculates' (Aboulela 1999, 37). Thus the novel offers us different interpretive renderings of a highly sensitive text, with a preference for privileging the source language (Arabic), demonstrating that translation here – as Steiner (2009, 38) puts it – 'is about letting the source culture speak in the target language'.

As Sammar and Rae explore each other's cultural subtexts while involved in the translation of scholarly material, they simultaneously come to know each other better. There are moments of incomprehension, as when Rae refers jokingly to God as playing golf and Sammar cannot comprehend why golf in particular. On the whole, the encounter of the two languages seems like a metaphor for what is going on between the two characters. But, just as the nuances of Arabic are rendered and explored in English translations, so is the resonance of English words for our heroine, Sammar. When Rae tells her that he feels safe with her, she 'picked up the word "safe" and put it aside, to peel it later and wonder what it meant' (Aboulela 1999, 45). Semantics seems to be the arena in which emotions as well as intellectual currents wrestle.

As the plot thickens, Sammar wants Rae to convert to Islam. She then tries to translate the significance of the *shahadah* (confession of faith). She struggles to explain the *shahadah* to someone who is secular but respectful of other people's beliefs, even though he does not share them. Her mode of translating moves from striving for the right word in the target language to adding explicative comments:

> She said, 'I wanted to talk to you about the *shahadah*, what it means.' … 'It's two things together, both beginning with the words, "I bear witness". I bear witness, I testify, to something intangible, invisible, but I have knowledge of it in my heart. There is no god except Allah, nothing else is worthy of worship. That's the first thing … Then the second thing … I bear witness that Muhammad is His messenger, a messenger not only to the Arabs who saw him and heard him, but to everyone, in every time.' (Aboulela 1999, 111)

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

Sammar is not simply translating the Islamic confession of faith; she is also adding explanations, such as ‘knowledge by heart’ and a ‘Messenger for all’, which are not, strictly speaking, in the *shahadah* phrase. She is interpreting the *shahadah* herself in a way that a non-Arab rationalist can grasp and sympathise with, focusing on (1) experiential understanding and (2) transnational faith. The Prophet’s message is for everyone and testifying to the existence of God comes through an inner feeling, not calculated proof. She keeps the term Allah, however, and does not render it as God, thus emphasising the untranslatability of His name.

The theme of ‘lost in translation’ is taken up by Rae as Sammar tries to describe the miracle of the Qur’an and its effect on people: ‘When the early verses of the Qur’an were recited, many people were crying from the words and how they sounded’, she says, and adds: ‘the meaning can be translated but not reproduced’ (Aboulela 1999, 111–112). When she comments that the first believers were women and slaves, she explains this by the fact that they have ‘softer hearts’. Rae’s reception aesthetics, on the other hand, are based on class. He suggests that ‘Maybe in changing [religion] they did not have much to lose’, while the ruling elite did not want to give up their privileges associated with the old religion (Aboulela 1999, 112).

Rae finally converts to Islam long after Sammar’s departure from Scotland, in what appears to be the fulfilment of her wish that he become Muslim for his own sake and not in order for her to have a husband and partner. She hears of it through their common friend, Fareed Khalifa. The news is passed on to her through a letter from Fareed and she gathers that Rae had waited for four months following his conversion to be absolutely sure of himself before breaking the news to her. What is interesting as far as translation is concerned is how she reacts:

> She had an airmail letter pad with her, a ball-point pen, two envelopes. She was going to write two letters in two languages. They would say the same thing but not be a translation. She wrote to Fareed first: long and cordial paragraphs, greetings … She wrote to Rae. One transparent sheet of airmail paper, a few lines (Aboulela 1999, 173).

Here, Aboulela is pointing out the different epistolary styles in Arabic and English, which vary in length and modes but can carry the same message. What is ornate in one style is bare in another, but the message can be the same. The correspondence need not be on the level of the content, but on the level of significance.

If we reflect on this novel, we can see that translation is not a matter of rendering the surface meaning of a text. To understand the world of the Arabs and Muslims, it is not enough to have access at second remove to their legacy and thought. One has to partake in a culture to grasp it fully. Meaning is elusive if we approach it from a distance. In that sense, this novel simultaneously complements and stands as a counterpoint to Borges’ story. It underlines the necessity of total immersion in the culture of the Other before one can decipher it.

The metaphor of the translator as a bridge between two linguistic traditions with which *The Translator* began is transformed in the finale of the novel. Instead of an ‘I-YOU’ relation, we end up with a ‘WE’ pronoun and thus a fusion. On the very last page, in what amounts to an allegorical epilogue, the novel articulates this fusion: ‘“We will give each other thoughts,” he said, “That would come out of us and then take shape and colour, become tangible gifts”’ (184). The novel is really a wish come true,[6] but it only comes true when the person who is making the wish is doing so not egotistically but altruistically. Here the translation, unlike that of Ibn Rushd in Borges’ story, is a

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

successful enterprise. Its success is due to a shift from linguistic engagement with a text to a quest for contextualisation. Cultural sensibility as a precondition of grasping the text of the Other is implied. Negotiating differences and correspondences, taking note of the core of the cultures, is being able to comprehend without dismissing the Other.

The novel ends with such an understanding of the Other, including the faith of the Other; Rae merges into the world of Islam – seen not any more as the abode of the Other but as a universal quest for Truth.

The translator as ironic hero

The protagonist in al-Sagr's novel, *Riyah sharqiyya…riyah gharbiyya*, is a translator named Muhammad Ahmad. The translator–character narrates the first part of the novel, subtitled 'The Fox's Paradise' (5–216). An omniscient narrator narrates almost all of the second part, subtitled 'The Eagle's Nest' (217–497), except for the last chapter (488–497), which again is narrated by the translator, Muhammad Ahmad. Many of the incidents in the first part of the novel are clarified by what we learn in the second part as they are shown from a different perspective. Thus, the second part of the novel partly overlaps and partly complements the first part, and in some sense translates it.

The first part of the novel is named after a key figure, Mr Fox, who runs the affairs of an oil project near Basra in Southern Iraq in the early 1950s – a time when the hegemony of the British was evident, despite the fact that Iraq had gained its nominal independence decades before. In this oil-centred settlement, there is definite segregation by nationality (British versus Iraqi) and by class (professionals versus workers). The more sophisticated and luxurious section of the settlement is reserved for the British and Iraqi doctors and engineers working on the project. A rudimentary camp is set up for the workers, in which our translator–protagonist lives along with others: the carpenter Istifan, foreman Abu Jabbar, camp manager Daniel, mechanic Muzhar Sa'id, Indian clerk Sayyid Fadlallah, etc. The workers' camp displays a mosaic of Iraqi society as it includes people from the south and the north of Iraq: Muslims and Christians; light-skinned and dark-skinned; educated and illiterate. Some of the northern Iraqi characters from what is known now as Iraqi Kurdistan do not speak Arabic well. Thus, the dialogue between the different characters is characterized by different uses of language: Iraqis who are native speakers of Arabic; Iraqis whose mother tongue is not Arabic; Englishmen who speak Arabic and other Englishmen who do not speak Arabic; an Indian who speaks English but not as a mother tongue. The novel in a way introduces a variety of characters that depict the multiplicity of languages and dialects. The text wavers between 'vehicular linguistic matching' and 'homogenizing conventions' – to use the terms of Sternberg – when representing linguistic pluralism ('Fictional Representations' 2009, 109–110).

The translator Muhammad Ahmad is the one who has the linguistic competence to understand all – even though as the narrative unfolds we discover, along with him, that Mr Fox knows Arabic because he had been a policeman in Palestine, but conceals his knowledge of Arabic to make sure that what is being translated is not partial or manipulated, particularly when the issue is the attitude towards the British. Muhammad Ahmad, as a translator, observes the drama that unfolds in the project settlement. He has joined the project in order to write a novel based on his experience in the camp and the interaction among its inhabitants. However, it is his manuscript of fictional writing that is passed on by the informer Abu Jabbar to Mr Fox. The latter reads it literally, as a report damning the authorities of the project, and thus the translator is sacked from his job at the end of the novel. The irony in Muhammad Ahmad's trajectory is that he never intended to be

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

anything but an observer, interested in reading literary works and writing a novel inspired by the experience of the camp, yet he ends up being classified as a subversive element. Having taken up writing a novel, Muhammad Ahmad unwittingly gets involved in a political struggle to which he did not contribute. Like Oedipus, he moves towards his destiny without knowing what he is doing. *Riyah* does not simply tell a story; it also tells the story of telling the story.

When the sinister character of Mr Fox interviews Muhammad Ahmad, the hierarchical relations and uneven power structure are displayed. Mr. Fox does not ask the translator to sit down even though there are chairs in his office. The questions related to knowledge of Arabic and English, according to Ahmad the translator, are superfluous, since he had already passed the required test for his job (al-Sagr 1988, 15).[7] The significance of the interview, then, is to intimidate Ahmad and indicate that his future is in his boss's hands.

The novel presents the struggle between workers and their bosses and the opposition between the British and the Iraqis. A few Iraqi workers act as informants for the British for multiple reasons, mostly economic advantages and career promotions. The engineers who live in the foreign section of the project settlement develop intimate relations with the foreigners, particularly the women, either to satisfy erotic urges or to emulate the British in their ways. The role of the translator in human relations is highlighted: in an indicative scene, when unemployed workers are denied a job, one of them – after uselessly appealing to the Sahib – ends up cursing Mr and Mrs Fox's pet dog, King George VI and Great Britain in a fit of anger. Ahmad is asked to translate what has been said. The translator's approach is to indicate why this worker is expressing himself in this way, so he translates the human response rather than the words: '"He is venting his anger because he didn't get a job"' (al-Sagr 1988, 20; my translation). Fox says he already knows this (from the tone and the context), but he wants to know the exact wording of what was said. Ahmad summarizes the whole by saying: 'he is saying "Down with Britain"', only to be asked what else was said, at which point the translator has to be literal and include all the heaped curses: 'He wished death for you and your wife's dog and the King' (al-Sagr 1988, 21; my translation).

When Ahmad learns that Mr Fox knows Arabic and does not really need a translator, he wonders why he is asking him to translate. He recalls the many times he edited what the employees had been saying:

> He did not even guess that Mr. Fox knew Arabic. He started recalling what has been said. He used to translate what the employees said in the presence of the Director [Fox], dropping the phrases of flattery and humiliating effeteness that come from those who are looking for a job or trying to disclaim accusations related to them. He also used to ignore the harsh and hostile words that some utter in moments of despair. He thought by doing this, he was protecting them from his [Fox's] harm. (al-Sagr 1988, 51)

In this game of mirrors, the translator is a cultural broker. He is not transparent and neutral; he corrects, revises and edits while translating, with the intention of preserving the dignity and safety of his compatriots.

Ahmad, who wavers between using first, second and third-person pronouns when he writes about himself, wonders if Mr Fox was not trying to set a trap for him through his pretence that he does not know Arabic. Clearly, the translator in this novel is not providing information that the receiver has no access to, as in Aboulela's *Translator*; his translation is the testing grounds for his inclinations, and specifically those toward

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

authority. Ahmad's feeling about this is expressed in a simile: 'he used to translate what he thought was appropriate ... then he discovered that the other knows Arabic. He felt as if he were walking naked in a public place' (al-Sagr 1988, 57).

Showcasing the good relations between employees and employers, Iraqis and British, a splendid party is set up. Husayn, the radical worker, mobilises people to boycott it, but many go there – mostly for the free beer and food. Ahmad has to go as he has to translate Mr Fox's speech, but he is also interested in going to the party as he wants to use it in the novel-in-progress he is working on (al-Sagr 1988, 61). Mr Fox's speech consists of typical public relations niceties about how the project represents 'one big happy family,' but he adds, when the audience applauds, an aside regarding how the 'bastards are anxious to drink' (al-Sagr 1988, 67). The translator contrasts the formality of the discourse used for an occasion with the real sentiments behind it, revealed in the side comment. As in Sammar's translation of Hadith Qudsi and her preference for the marginal interpretation, Ahmad puts the emphasis on the marginal comment rather than the discourse itself. While in *The Translator* the marginal note is preferred over the translated text, here the marginal subverts the formal discourse and reveals Mr Fox's true sentiments.

When Ahmad is asked to translate a newspaper article about striking Iraqi workers in a British barracks in Habaniyya, he reads Fox's English handwriting in the Arabic text: 'Dangerous sign! More care to be taken here. Enquire from B.C.B. for more details' (al-Sagr 1988, 86–87; my translation). The translator cannot decode the acronym BCB and wonders if it is a person or an agency. Later, when Ahmad has a chance, he asks Husam Hilmy, the British-educated engineer on the project. Hilmy responds by saying that it is difficult to figure out what the letters stand for, then begins to guess: 'B is the first letter of Basra and Baghdad or British for example. C stands for Company and possibly Committee, Commission, Consulate; yes, may be that one' (al-Sagr 1988, 120). Hilmy then explains that maybe the phrase means 'Enquire from the British Consulate in Basra for more details' (al-Sagr 1988, 121; my translation). The translator is bewildered by this coded message and wonders to whom the command is given. Hilmy answers that it is to himself – a note to remind himself. Our naïve translator is surprised to discover that Fox collaborates with the British Consulate. Multilingualism, abbreviations and ambiguous comments challenge Ahmed to figure out not only what words mean (which he already knows), but also what their significance is. In this case, the translator is a palimpsest who is deciphering rather than simply translating; he is searching for the connection between Fox's comment and the published article about the workers' strike.

Like Oedipus, Ahmad thinks he knows as best as he can how to comprehend the two sides, not realizing that he is not the observer, but the observed. Discovery of the situation comes only later. When the radical worker Husayn asks Ahmad what his novel is all about, Ahmad explains using the literary terminology of a 'bird's eye view':

> You can imagine me as a bird roaming high in the evening over this small piece of land and seeing beneath it two worlds separated by a public road from Basra, as if it were a long black wall, like a barrier not easy to penetrate. On one side of it, next to the desert, lives a group of workers. On the other side among the palm groves next to Shatt al-'Arab banks, lies the neighborhood of the bosses. On this side, the bird also sees the work place, the site where the inhabitants of both sides meet ... .You can imagine that this bird has an extraordinary capacity to unmask and to know what is concealed – all that is designed and plotted secretly and behind walls and in bedrooms in a given period of time. My novel will be in two books, or let us say with two faces, the face of each side will be present. (al-Sagr 1988, 140; my translation)

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

Here, the translator is bifocal, seeing the two sides, and therefore is able to decipher bit by bit the hidden; his is an exercise in hermeneutics. Although he loses his job, he wins his soul and completes his novel within the novel. It takes him a long time to grasp the intricacies behind the façades and to construct his novel. The finale corresponds, albeit in a different key, to the ending of Betool Khedairi's (2001) novel.[8]

The translator as collaborating hero

In Kachachi's novel, *Al-Hafida al-Amrikiyya* (2008) [*The American Granddaughter* (2010)], Zeina Behnam is an Iraqi American who left Iraq with her family as a young girl to avoid persecution during Saddam Hussein's regime. The book is a *Bildungsroman* of sorts. While the parents, and particularly the mother, are unable to cope with their uprooting, Zeina adjusts well, excelling in both Arabic – spoken at home – and English, spoken everywhere else. As a young woman during the second Gulf War (2003), she responds to an ad by the American government for a translator to accompany the occupying forces. She gets the job and moves with the American army to Iraq, tempted by both the monetary reward and the fulfilment of her patriotic duty as an American to help her government topple Saddam Hussein and liberate Iraq (Kachachi 2010, 8–10). Her grandmother in Iraq would be scandalised to find out her granddaughter is working with the enemy, so Zeina tries to hide the nature of her job. Taken in by American war propaganda, she sees herself as helping both her native country and her adopted country. As the novel unfolds, Zeina discovers the paradox of her identity and the impossibility of meshing the occupier with the occupied. As she becomes emotionally attracted to a militant in the Mahdi militia, who is also a milk brother (kin through breastfeeding), she begins to see another perspective on the war on terror. She comes back to the US having lost her youthful exuberance and questioning her former values. Her earlier convictions have been destabilised; she returns to the US somewhat 'lost, confused and at war with herself' (Faltas 2009, 10), as if the external war she joined as a mediator has ironically penetrated her psyche. Unlike the protagonist of Khedairi's *A Sky so Close*, who seems to have worked out her inner split by opting to be a translator, Zeina's career as a translator forces her to come to grips with her inner contradictions. The translator here is a metaphor for hybrid identities and the difficulty of negotiating them. The biculturalism of Zeina is undermined by the asymmetry of power. Here the translator, as in many African narratives, is a collaborator, an agent of the powerful.[9] There is no way to bridge the binary of victim and victimiser. Not only is Zeina's naiveté exposed; also, her romance with a member of a resistance militia, who is also kin, implies her Iraqi roots are stronger than her acquired Americanization. Semiotically speaking, this corresponds to the force of the source language and indigenous culture in translation over the acquired language. This is often the reason why native speakers are judged to be better translators than those who have acquired near-native fluency.

Translation itself in this novel is not seen as a vocation but as an opportunity to accumulate wealth speedily, profiting from a critical moment in the life of an occupied people and/or seeking adventure and exotic splendour. Zeina describes Nadia, the Egyptian translator, who joined the American army and left her baby behind with her ex-husband, as a 'hustler by nature' (Kachachi 2010, 23). Nadia wants to be in the Green Zone, working in one of the palaces of former President Saddam Hussein. Rula, the Lebanese translator, is emphatic about not staying anywhere except the fabulous Baghdad Hotel. Nadia and Rula hardly know anything about Iraq, not even recognising what Tikrit – the hometown of Saddam Hussein – stands for in the Iraqi imaginary (Kachachi 2010, 38). Later, both leave

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

without completing their contracts because they have been assigned to work outside Baghdad and they did not find what they expected – an Orientalist vision of seductive Iraq (Kachachi 2010, 49–50).

One can also see the hierarchy established between local interpreters and foreign interpreters; the colonial order in British Iraq as presented by al-Sagr now becomes neocolonial in American Iraq:

> The local interpreters were our envoys to the outside world. They didn't enter the camp, but stood at the outer gate to interpret between the guards and members of the public, who were then escorted to the next gate to be handed over to an American interpreter. (Kachachi 2010, 87)

Unlike the relationship between Sammar and Rae in *The Translator*, where engaging in translation and interpretation brings them closer despite occasional misunderstanding and puzzlement, Zeina's effort to translate Arabic locutions for her American boyfriend Calvin brings only irritation: 'I once tried to translate for him the Arabic saying about the monkey being as beautiful as a gazelle in his mother's eyes, but he stared at me blankly and said that indeed he considered the monkey more beautiful than the gazelle' (Kachachi 2010, 45). Clearly, Calvin misses the point because he does not grasp the cultural connotations of monkey and gazelle in Arab culture. It is not surprising that Zeina gives up on trying to make pithy Arabic sayings coherent to him. To comprehend a statement from another linguistic tradition one needs more than equivalences: one needs immersion in the culture and its symbolic framework. Likewise, when Zeina re-links with her culture via her Shi'ite brother/beloved, her very language takes the aura of militant Islam: 'I launched my own *jihad* and let my soul go off-road' (Kachachi 2010, 47). This is a telling example of counter-acculturation of an Americanized Iraqi, in contrast to the Iraqi engineers' acculturation to British ways in al-Sagr's novel.

The translator as comic hero

If Ibn Rushd offers us the translator as a tragic hero, Hamid Salim, the translator in Fawwaz Haddad's novel, *The Treacherous Translator*, is a comic hero – though not entirely. We laugh at him but we also sympathise with him; he is a tragicomic figure. As a translator, our anti-hero decides that the Anglophone novel by an African writer which he is translating is a great novel with a bad ending, because in the finale the academic protagonist decides to stay in Britain with his white sweetheart. Our translator decides to improve on the original and make the protagonist go back to his country in Africa, leaving his European beloved, in recognition of his moral responsibility to his people. Had this African novel not received the prestigious Booker prize, no one would have discovered the translator's treason. Once it becomes known, the Syrian intellectual clique (occasionally referred to in the novel as *mafia*) denounces it, not out of ethical considerations but in order to give the impression of intellectual honesty, despite the corruption of the comprador intelligentsia in Syria.

The rest of the novel is about our translator trying first to defend himself, by writing to explain the need to translate freely and also revealing that the critic who criticised him had no knowledge of English with which to judge his translation. What follows, after the novel challenges the intellectual establishment and reveals its ignorance, is a downward spiral for Salim. To save his skin, he allows others to exploit him: he becomes an invisible translator, with the credit going to another; he writes custom-made articles in the papers to downgrade

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

or upgrade writers according to the needs of the establishment. Finally, he is engaged by one of those fake intellectuals to ghost-write novels for him. He becomes a shadow of his old self, using pseudonyms in each role: Halfawi, Haflawi and Halfani. Haddad's novel exposes the sick milieu of letters in Syria, but also implicitly uses the Italian saying *traduttore, traditore* to speculate on the very concept of treason – how is treason to be judged in translation and elsewhere? And above all he exposes – while discussing different views on equivalence versus adaptation in translation – Benda's *trahison des clercs*. The entire novel is a variation on different types of treason – conjugal infidelity, institutional deviance and, above all, intellectual opportunism. In her review of this novel, Abu El Naga (2009) refers to it as *marthiyat al-muthaqafin* (elegy for the intellectuals).

The translator opts to betray the original not simply by taking stylistic liberties, but in following a strategy of additions to and omissions from the plot. Serious as this might be, we do have parallels in the uneven history of translation – perhaps the best known is that of Ezra Pound's translations from ancient Egyptian poetry. The revision of plots does take place occasionally in adaptations without much concern for the original, particularly when transforming a novel into a film; however, as our translator, Hamid Salim, does not reveal his 'contribution' and pretends it is a translation of the original, thus readers expect to be reading the same story, just in a different language. The irony in Haddad's novel is not that the protagonist is unethical and gets reprimanded for it, but that his unethical manipulation of the original is used as an excuse to enslave him to a corrupt institution and make him indulge in further unethical practices. In the cycle of decline of our translator–hero, his vulnerability and naiveté constitute the hilarious dimension of the text as well as the human condition in a totalitarian regime.

The underlying playfulness in this novel lies squarely in the title. The betrayal is double, if not triple: the African intellectual betrays his third-world country by opting to stay in comfortable Europe rather than shouldering his national responsibility. By improving on the novel and changing the finale, the translator, Hamid Salim, is committing a betrayal to undo another. The corrupt institution's using the betrayal of the translator to blackmail him, and later to have him commit other betrayals, presents a series of embedded betrayals. Whenever one tries to eradicate dishonesty, one falls into another form – even worse. The other alternative to this downward spiral is to isolate oneself completely, like the author–character Samih Hamdi. Another victim of the system, Hamdi avoids the institutional framework and becomes an eccentric, verging on madness. When he dies in the street after meeting our hero the translator, following an accidental fall, his death is presented as if it were instigated in a very roundabout way by the *Mukhabarat*, the Syrian Secret Service (Haddad 2008 434). The paranoia in a police state is such that accidents are viewed as designed schemes.

The dilemma for any translator is how to reproduce a text in a different language and in a different culture with its own specific symbolic structure. The options open are all relative betrayals; betrayal, however, takes a different connotation in translation, summarised in the phrase *les belles infidèles*. Haddad's novel opens with two indicative chapters, entitled 'On Translation' and 'The Translator', in which the author starts by characterizing the hero as a somewhat stubborn person. The omniscient narrator remarks that this quality is not a trustworthy trait, particularly in a translator, as the process requires experimentation and flexibility, a willingness to admit errors, ingenuity in translating curse words or dropping them altogether, searching for meanings of words and expressions that are nonsensical and scrutinising terms to find those most appropriate for the context (Haddad 2008 13). The narrator concludes that translation needs mindfulness and, more clearly, hesitation. It is only in examining what Hamid Salim goes through that one can appreciate his patience for

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

rendering a three-word sentence: *kanat al-sama' mudlahimma* (the sky was gloomy), or *kanat al-sama' mukfahirra* (the sky was dark), or *kanat al-sama' gha'ima* (the sky was cloudy) (Haddad 2008, 14–15; my translation). Finally, the narrator, who embodies the consciousness of the hero, Salim, says that for the general reader this word or that word by a foreign author makes little difference, but critics ought to know better the travails of translators and express appreciation for their demanding task (Haddad 2008, 16).

In the second chapter, the critique of the modified translation of an African novel, published in a newspaper article, suggests that the translator should attend a translation workshop and that censorship ought to prohibit incompetent translations and not simply be concerned with the three taboos – sex, religion and politics (Haddad 2008, 18). Salim admits that he does not follow the original texts word for word and is not obsessed with fidelity to the original, as he is concerned with the 'spirit of the text' (Haddad 2008, 18–19; my translation). This stretching of the translator's licence *ad absurdum* is combined with self-defensive justifications. According to Salim, real translation incorporates the original work, adding to it beautifying touches dictated by 'the specificity of our beautiful language' (Haddad 2008, 19; my translation). After all, the original author writes for his community and not for the world at large, which is unknown to him. However, the translator knows the world he is translating far better than the original author (Haddad 2008, 22). Apart from the arguments of domestication versus foreignisation, fidelity versus treason, the Augustinian notion of the letter of the text and/versus the spirit of the text, we find here Salim's mobilisation of the role of reception aesthetics and the importance of the target language in improving the original. While one has to juggle one betrayal against another in the process of translation, our hero here renames betrayal an act of beautification. The image of the translator in this work is not that of someone with the double-consciousness and the visionary power associated with it, but a creative writer manqué, someone who cannot resist rewriting while translating.

The finale of the novel presents the interpenetration of the author's life and his fictional imagination. Deciding to write a novel about his own life, and not sell the idea of a novel to the imposter who wants to be a writer, Salim decides to sever the binding and exploitative relationship with this fake novelist. He plans to meet him late at night and get rid of him physically by pushing him over the top of a bridge. The life of Salim is intertwined with his novel in progress, as he tries to get rid of his exploiter while formulating the last chapter of his fictional autobiography. This inability to keep distinctions between lived experience and fictional unfolding parallels the failure to distinguish between translator and author. The key to this confusion lies perhaps in the rhetorical question posed on the affinity of art and translation in the subtitle of the second chapter in the novel: 'Isn't Art in Essence a Translation Process?' (Haddad 2008, 17; my translation). In this blurring of borders, the translator is as laughable a hero as Don Quixote de la Mancha.

The translator as impotent hero

Sarmad Burhan al-Din, the translator in Alia Mamdouh's (2007) novel *Al-Tashahhi*, is impotent literally and metaphorically. While many of the novels discussed position the translator between two radically different cultures, those of the domineering west and the subjugated east, in Mamdouh's work, like that of Haddad, the subjugation of the translator is accomplished by his own compatriots. Mamdouh (2007) goes further than Haddad in making the translator suffer at the hands of his kin; in this case his elder brother, Muhannad Burhan al-Din, who works in the Iraqi *Mukhabarat*, the Intelligence Service. Whereas Salim's mind seems to be affected when undergoing exploitation, Burhan al-Din

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

is compromised physically. He substitutes his loss of power with indulgence in sex and food. His obesity, coupled with the atrophy of his masculine member, is Mamdouh's (2007) characterisation of the failed Iraqi intellectual. Seeking help in a mental health clinic in Paris, the translator comes to be known as the 'Iraqi Patient'. Mamdouh (2007) offers an anatomy of the Iraqi intelligentsia in its masculine indulgence that masks an initial deprivation of power, culminating in impotence. This is another novel on the *trahison des clercs*, but one that starts with altruism and ends with self-indulgence. Sarmad Burhan al-Din starts as a communist in a moving romantic relationship with Alif, but the system, in its brutality and corruption, both deprives him of his beloved and robs him of his lofty ideology. Mamdouh (2007) analyses the failure of progressive forces in Iraq as well as the inner destructiveness of such forces. Alif is invariably Iraq, captured by the brutal regime (Muhannad Burhan al-Din) and not rescued by the intelligentsia (Burhan al-Din).[10] The novel is not allegorical, as the descriptions of sexual encounters, of the hero's obesity, of the miniscule, atrophied penis, of medical conversations, are all detailed and exude a surrealism similar to that of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. The novel also proposes a narrative of Iraq as captive of a dictatorial regime and foreign occupation, still yearning for its progressive intellectuals.

Al-Tashahhi is rich with characters, much like Haddad's novel. But whereas Haddad's characters are all Syrian (apart from one Iraqi who seeks refuge in Syria), Mamdouh's (2007) fictional world includes characters from several countries: Fiona, the Scottish teacher who taught Sarmad Burhan al-Din English and love-making; Henka, the Bulgarian; Amina, the Moroccan translator from Casablanca; Kiota, the German; Abu al-'Izz, the Palestinian; Mr Scott, the executive director of the British Council in Baghdad; Faris, the Kurd, and his sister Ronak; Rama, the Malaysian; Hakim, the Pakistani doctor, among others.

As a professional Iraqi translator living in London, Sarmad Burhan al-Din seems to dread the adventure of translation and sees it as *tadnis*, profanation, of the original. He refers to translation as the 'cursed fruit' (Mamdouh 2007, 15; my translation). Is this because he first grasped the intricacies of English as a teenager through an illicit relationship with Fiona – his teacher in Baghdad, who was as old as his mother – in which he lost his virginity (Mamdouh 2007, 36–44)? Or was it because his brother Muhannad viewed his desire to be a translator as willingness to be a spy (Mamdouh 2007, 19)? The copy editor in London responds to him laughingly, saying that translation is a seductive career that may lead to perdition (Mamdouh 2007, 15).

Sarmad is a translator taken by literature and poetics. He has translated T.S. Eliot and wrote an incomplete MA thesis on him (Mamdouh 2007, 28), and has tried his hand at Shakespeare's sonnets (Mamdouh 2007, 119), Emily Dickinson (Mamdouh 2007, 160) and Hugh of Saint Victor (Mamdouh 2007, 144–45). Thus he has an understanding of the intricacies of tones and voices. He attributes the failure of the communist movement in Iraq to the failure of translation of the *Communist Manifesto*. Here, 'translation' suggests Arabization and adjusting the Marxist vision to the Arab world, instead of transferring it mindlessly word for word: 'Translation killed communism even before its own wanton practices did. The translator gave in to the facile', using terms arbitrarily, as Burhan al-Din puts it. He adds: 'if we only played a little with the translation, with the possible variations instead of strict rendering … Treason in translation is far better than betraying the idea' (Mamdouh 2007, 143; my translation). He senses that the original *Manifesto* was akin to a poem that lost its thrust in translation.

Burhan al-Din's aspirations are undermined by the regime; later foreign invasion and occupation complete the defeat, symbolised by his loss of virility. Sexually disabled, he seeks help in a clinic where Dr Yusuf – an old friend from Baghdad –

works. Alif is always on his mind, though she has been abducted and appropriated by his own brother Muhannad. Despite all his sexual adventures, he remains mentally attached to her. The solution sought by the protagonist in seeking medical help does not work and he ends up semi-conscious and refusing to talk. This novel goes beyond what Tayeb Salih (1969) presented in *Season of Migration to the North*, though sexuality and power function similarly as interfaces. Mamdouh's (2007) novel is a *voyage in*, exploring via the translator–protagonist the ills of Iraqi society and, by extension, of Arab societies. No doubt masculinity, *al-dhukuriyya*, in its hegemonic and appropriative discourse, in its role of masking political failure, is a symptom of dysfunctional societies, as the author seems to point out. To revive the Iraqi patient, his friend Yusuf plays for him a recording by Alif. In that long message, Alif asks him to remain alive, as this will unnerve Muhannad (the regime) and the fair-skinned (the invaders). Despite the profound disaster of the left, it has to not die altogether, but here is where language becomes inadequate to express the painful Iraqi saga. Alif questions the competence of the very language to be both the language of culture and the language of torture:

> 'How could English with which we were enamored and from which we translated and exchanged ideas and dreams become the language of the criminal invaders? Arabic too has become muddled, so in what language can we write down what is happening and in what language should we inscribe what is going on? The curse takes off and rises over Babel and over all tongues' (Mamdouh 2007, 266; my translation).

Alluding to the tower of Babel, where the people were confounded by different languages, Mamdouh (2007) goes one step further: it is not only that translation is impossible, but the very fabric of language, any language, becomes impotent in the face of the Iraqi disaster.

From the image of the translator as omnipotent agent of change and harmony, as presented in Aboulela's novel, we come across a translator in Alia Mamdouh's (2007) novel who is chronically ill and out of shape. Mamdouh (2007) presents the translator as anti-hero. Unlike Haddad's hero/anti-hero, with whom we as readers partly sympathise, Mamdouh's (2007) translator is a degraded human being whom we can observe without empathy.

Conclusion

One can speculate on the phenomenon of having translators as fictional heroes. There is a plethora of narratives revolving around the translator as a protagonist – something that is new in fiction in general, and in Arabic fiction in particular. This might be a symptom of postmodern and postcolonial literatures. Just as the translator is a *post*writer – if one may use this term to indicate coming after a writer – so it could be argued, for example, that postcolonialism cannot be conceived except as taking place after colonialism and in relation to the colonial factor. Analogously, the translator cannot perform a translation unless there is a prior text. Both are secondary, in the sense that something precedes them. But 'secondary' here is not derogatory: they are secondary in the same sense in which, semiotically speaking, poetry is a secondary system to the language system, which precedes it. Reasons parallel to those given by Jon Thiem (1995) on why the translator has become a hero in postmodern fiction can be applicable to postcolonial fiction. All the writers mentioned, from Borges to Mamdouh, have either lived away from their homeland or are 'translators' implicitly or explicitly, by the very fact of their dislocation. Living as an exile or as an immigrant in a

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

different culture is necessarily a situation in which comparisons between the past and the present, there and here, are contrasted, compared and 'translated'. For Arab writers, whether writing in Arabic or in English, an Arab protagonist is expected – but why did the Argentinean Borges opt for an Arab hero for his tragic story? At the finale of the story, Borges identifies himself and his search for understanding of Averroes with Averroes' search for the right translation of dramatic terminology. Both endeavours were doomed, so Borges' choice of the Other as protagonist is the search for a parallel to his failure; he saw himself in Averroes.

Another point that surfaces in these works that probably explains the new frequency of the translator as a hero lies in the position of the translator vis-à-vis the author. While the author exudes authority and creativity, the translator until recently has been seen at best as a catalyst, not a prime mover, and at worst entrusted with an intellectually menial task. The translator then becomes the synecdoche of the intellectual in an authoritarian regime where the postcolonial state has reproduced the colonial order, albeit with native faces. In resistance movements, and in national liberation movements, the poet became the spokesman of the tribe. With post-independence, the novelists came to write an alternative history to that of colonial or traditional historians. But with the rise of authoritarian regimes in the Third World, intellectuals in general either became impotent in the face of their governments or lost their mission as progressive forces. Their loss of power, then, can be seen in terms of the status and position of a translator – hardworking but hardly appreciated, and definitely not a redeemer. The translator is seen as a shadow of the author; it is this shadowy existence and marginalization or distortion of the progressive intellectual that s/he embodies. The translator becomes an apt figure for this reduced intellectual.

Not surprisingly, the fiction discussed in this article touches on basic issues of translation: fidelity versus creativity. These very concepts have to do with power, for in the case of fidelity the translator is governed by a prior text and is captive to its wording; in the case of creativity the translator is on an equal level with the author and can improve, transform and imagine other renderings. Thus translation is an omnipotent agency.

Whereas earlier literary postcolonial works pitted the native against the foreign, the indigenous culture against the hegemonic colonial culture, the new wave of writing is concerned less with ethnicity or race and more with power and powerlessness. Apart from the wish-fulfilment of Sammar in *The Translator*, all other translators suffer and fail. Their failure, whether tragic or comic, symbolizes the anxiety of the intellectuals and their defeat in the face of authority.

All works of literature carry an ideology or a worldview that is often concealed, and that critics try to decipher. However, as Michael Cronin, writing on the geopolitics of translation, has pointed out, theoretical perspectives from the Third World are under-represented, and possibly there is a scarcity of them (Cronin 2002, 49–52). But in reading how novelists have presented the process of translation and the role of the translator, we can come to understand how fiction can actually contribute to theory, albeit not using a critical discourse. The large number of novels with a translator–protagonist in a globalised world brings a new perspective on identity, not as something static but as something ambivalent, hybrid and ever-changing. These novels make use of the professional translator to throw light on society and perennial issues, but also present a view of the complex translating process. They represent a fictional contribution to translation studies even though they are not elaborating critical arguments on translation, but are rather giving us a glimpse of what translation can or could imply. The very ambiguity of translation and its different philosophies make of the translator a protean character. From a catalyst of progress and modernization to an agent of hegemonic orders,[11] the image of the translator is polarised. As Hewson (1997, 47) put it, 'the image [of the translator] embodies a series of paradoxes'. Though translation is compromised by

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

power politics, it is also 'the primary means by which cultures travel' (Dingwaney 1995, 6), exhibiting thus a necessity of cultural crossing and a risk of cultural conquest. The translator fits the figure of an epic hero, and equally that of a protagonist in a popular comedy. Just as writing novels about artists gave rise to the subgenre of *Künstlerroman* when artists stood for the genius of a society, there is a subgenre of translation fiction on the rise, as presented by recent studies (see Delabastita and Grutman 11–34). It is preoccupied with mediation in a fragmented world, aspiring but constantly failing to achieve genuinely one world, given the uneven distribution of power and the intrinsic global injustice of our political economy. The cliché of the world becoming a village is both true and untrue. It is indeed a village in the sense that we know what is happening instantly around us and in remote places, here and elsewhere; but it is not yet a communal site as a village is. The failed translator is an appropriate hero of our political unconscious. The successful translator is the hero of our wishful thinking.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. The translator, Anthony Kerrigan, took it upon himself to remove one of the Muhammads in the name given by Borges. Borges opens the short story by giving the full name of the protagonist: 'Abulgualid Muhammád Ibn-Ahmad ibn-Muhammád ibn-Rushd'. In the translation of the same story by James E. Irby the full name is given as in Borges (1964), without anglicizing the spelling of the hispanized 'Abulgualid' and turning it into 'Abu al-Walid'. I think the anglicization of the transliterated name is the right thing for a translator to do, but the omission of one of the Muhammáds is unfortunate (even though the second Muhammád is an addition by Borges; it is not mentioned in the standard references to Ibn Rushd). The repetition creates a poetic strangeness, justified by the subject matter and the ambience it attempts to create. Borges himself said, in a Columbia University translation seminar:

   > Following the original Arabic word order, he [Burton] called his book *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*. Now there he created something not to be found in the original, since to anyone who knows Arabic the phrase isn't at all strange; it's the normal way of saying it. But in English it sounds very strange, and there is a certain beauty attained, in this case, through literal translation. (Giovanni, Halpern, and MacShane 1973: 104)

2. What is in the spelling of a name? It seems everything that matters is in the spelling of a name. In an article by Pascale Ghazaleh (1998), she comments on the debates of Middle Eastern historians and the discussion revolving around transliteration of the name of Mohamed Ali (and thus his identity):

   > Should it be written Muhammad Ali, as Arabists would prefer? Or would Mehmet Ali (as pronounced in Turkish) be more reflective of the fact that the Pasha and his entourage belonged … to the 'Ottoman-Egyptian elite'? In Lefevere and Bassnett (1990) "Introduction" to their book, they mention a similar anecdote in Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. Proust's grandmother expressed utter displeasure in a new translation of the *Arabian Nights*, in which the earlier rendering of 'Caliph"' was mutilated beyond recognition in the new version, rendered as 'Khalifat' (1–2).

3. Anthropologists have discussed the difficulty of translating terms and terminology embedded in one culture, yet absent in another. Evans-Pritchard (1965, 13) concludes that there can only be partial overlap of meaning in translating key concepts in the culture of the Other. More

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

recently, Vincent Crapanzano and Talal Asad (1988) have addressed the issue of deformation of significance in the process of linguistic transfers. Crapanzano (1992) compares the ethnographer to the translator who 'must render the foreign familiar and preserve its very foreignness at one and the same time' (qtd. in 'Cultural Translation', 67).

4. There is foreshadowing here of the finale of the short story, when Borges speaks *qua* Borges in the last paragraph about his failure in representing Ibn Rushd: 'I sensed that Averroes, striving to imagine a drama without ever having suspected what a theater was, was no more absurd than I, who strove to imagine Averroes with no material other than some fragments from Renan, Lane, and Asín Palacios' ('Averroes' Search', trans. Kerrigan, 110). Thus just as Averroes found affinities with Zuhair, so Borges finds affinities with Averroes – at least in their common failure in presenting the Other.
5. For a review of the novel, see Ferial J. Ghazoul (2001), 'Halal Fiction'.
6. Northrop Frye (1957, 186) asserts: 'The romance is nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream … In every age the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance, where the virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals'.
7. All translations from this novel are mine. I had translated relevant passages before the publication of Paul Starkey's translation in 2010.
8. The unnamed narrator of Betool Khedairi's (2001) novel, *A Sky So Close*, ends up becoming a translator to solve her double identity. She is a child of an Iraqi father and a British mother who becomes a daily witness to intimate parental tensions due to cultural conflicts. Having spent the 1970s in Iraq, she moves to England in the 1980s to nurse her mother, who is dying from cancer. It is a *Bildungsroman*, a novel of formation in which the child, attached to her father and Iraqi children of her age, resents her mother's imposition of English norms; but as she grows older and takes care of her mother in a London hospital, she is reconciled with her and fathoms her mother's psychological and emotional needs as an expatriate in Iraq. She grows into an understanding of both parents and, perhaps as an index of her grasp of a two-sided situation, she opts to take up the profession of translator, where duality can coexist. This professional orientation comes at the end of the novel, but it undoes the split that the protagonist endured. Here we find the translator as a figure of unity in diversity, a Janus figure that can bridge the two shores without sacrificing the specificity of each – a 'bird' that can fly above and see both worlds.
9. In African literature, and particularly in *The Fortunes of Wangrin*, the modern classic by Amadou Hampaté Bâ (1999),, the translator is presented as a collaborator with the colonialists. See also Raymond Mopoho's (2005) article on the image of the native translator in French colonial Africa, 'Perception et autoportrait de l'interprète indigène en Afrique coloniale française'.
10. Reviewers of the book, such as Mohammed Berrada (2007), found in Alif (who decides to stay in Iraq) a symbol of Iraq 'as space, memory, and steadfastness' (my translation). Hélène Cixous, referring to Alia Mamdouh's (2007) work, sees in it a passion for the homeland, Iraq, which she calls 'Désirak' (Chanda, n.pag.).
11. In an article dated 23 November 2011 anticipating the departure of American forces from occupied Iraq, *Al-Hayat* daily reported that translators in Iraq are despised and considered 'traitors, spies, and collaborators' – hence their fear following American withdrawal ('Alaf al-mutarjimin' 21). This might be contrasted with the annual celebration of the Day of the Translator by the Association of Arab Translators (founded in 30 January 2002 in Beirut) under the heading of the role of the translator in progress and development, as reported in *Al-Hayat*, 'Mas'uliyyat al-mutarjim al-'arabi' (21).

Notes on contributor

Ferial J. Ghazoul is professor of English and Comparative Literature at the American University in Cairo and the Editor of *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*. She has published extensively on medieval comparative literature, postcolonial studies, and women's writing. She is an award-winning translator of modern Arabic poetry.

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

References

Aboulela, L. 1999. *The Translator*. Edinburgh: Polygon.

Abu El Naga, S. 2009. "Marthiyya riwa'iyya li-l-muthaqqafin," *Akhbar al-Adab*, 30. March 15.

"Alaf al-mutarjimin wa-l-'ummal yuwajihun azma masiriyya ba'd al-insihab al-amriki," 2011. *Al-Hayat*, 21. November 23.

Asad, T. 1988. *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.

'Ayyad, S. 1967. *Kitab Aristutalis fi al-shi'r*. Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi.

Bâ, A. H. 1999. *The Fortunes of Wangrin*. Translated by Aina Pavolini Taylor. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

"Cultural Translation." 2009a. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. 2nd ed. edited by M. Baker and G. Saldanha, 67–69. London: Routledge.

Berrada, M. 2007. "Alia Mamdouh tabhath 'an al-'illa al-khafiyya li-l-marad al-'iraqi," 16. *Al-Hayat*. June 21.

Borges, J. L. 1964. "Averroes' Search." In *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*. Translated by James E. Irby and Jorge Luis Borges, eds. D. A. Yates and J. E. Irby, 148–155. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation.

Borges, J. L. 1967. "Averroes' Search." In *A Personal Anthology*. Translated by Anthony Kerrigan and Jorge Luis Borges, edited by A. Kerrigan, 101–110. New York: Grove Press.

Borges, J. L. "La busca de Averroes," *Prosa completa 2*. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1979. pp. 303–310.

Butterworth, C. 1986. trans. *Averroes' Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Chanda, T. "Alia Mamdouh: Quatre questions à la romancière irakienne." http://www.rfi.fr/sites/filesrfi/Irak%20Alia%20Mamdouh%20Litt%C3%A9rature.doc

Crapanzano, V. 1992. *Hermes' Dilemma and Hamlet's Desire: On the Epistemology of Interpretation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cronin, M. 2002. "The Empire Talks Back: Orality, Heteronomy, and the Cultural Turn in Interpretation Studies." In *Translation and Power*, edited by M. Tymoczko and E. Gentzler, 45–62. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Delabastita, D. and R. Grutman. 2005. "Fictional Representations of Multilingualism and Translation". *Linguistica Antverpiensai* 4: 11–34.

Dingwaney, A. 1995. "Introduction: Translating 'Third World' Cultures." In *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-Cultural Texts*, edited by A. Dingwaney and C. Maier, 3–15. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1965. *Theories of Primitive Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Faltas, Y. 2009. "In a Sea of Words, An American Translator Searches for Herself," *Daily News Egypt*, 10, March 13.

"Fictional Representations." 2009b. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. 2nd ed. edited by M. Baker and G. Saldanha, 109–111. London: Routledge.

Frye, N. 1957. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ghazaleh, P. 1998. "The Missing Link," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 15. August 27–September 2.

Ghazoul, F. J. 2001. "Halal Fiction," *Al-Ahram Weekly*. July 2–18. (Monthly Supplement 27): 3.

Giovanni, N. T., D. Halpern, and F. MacShane, eds. 1973. *Borges on Writing*. New York: E. P. Dutton.

Haddad, F. 2008. *Al-Mutarjim Al-Kha'in*. Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes Books.

Hewson, L. 1997. "Change in Translation and the Image of the Translator." In *Translating Sensitive Texts: Linguistic Aspects*, edited by S. Karl, 47–56. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Kachachi, I. 2008. *Al-Hafida Al-Amrikiyya*. Beirut: Dar Al-Jadid.

Kachachi, I. 2010. *The American Granddaughter*. Translated by Nariman Youssef. Doha: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing.

Khedairi, B. 2001. *A Sky So Close*. Translated by Muhayman Jamil. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

Lefevere, A. and S. Bassnett. 1990. "Introduction: Proust's Grandmother and the Thousand and One Nights: The 'Cultural Turn' in Translation Studies." In *Translation, History and Culture*, 1–13. London: Pinter Publishers.

Maier, C. 2006. "The Translator as *Theôros*: Thoughts on Cogitation, Figuration, and Current Creative Writing." *CTIS Occasional Papers* 3: 7–28.

"Masu'liyyat al-mutarjim al-'arabi fi al-taghyyir wa-l-taqaddum." 2011. *Al-Hayat*, 21. February 3.

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017

Mamdouh, A. 2007. *Al-Tashahhi*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab.
Mopoho, R. 2005. "Perception et autoportrait de l'interprète indigène en afrique coloniale française." *Linguistica Antverpiensa* 4: 77–92.
Pagano, A. S. 2002. "Translation as Testimony: On Official Histories and Subversive Pedagogies in Cortázar." In *Translation and Power*, edited by M. Tymoczko and E. Gentzler, 80–98. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
al-Sagr, M. I. 1998. *Riyah Sharqiyya. Riyah Gharbiyya*. Cairo: Dar Ishtar lil-nashr.
al-Sagr, M. 2010. *East Winds, West Winds*. Translated by Paul Starkey. Cairo: The American University Press.
Salih, T. 1969. *Season of Migration to the North*. Translated by Denys Johnson-Davies. London: Heinemann.
Steiner, T. 2009. *Translated People, Translated Texts: Language and Migration in Contemporary African Literature*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.
Thiem, J. 1995. "The Translator as Hero in Postmodern Fiction." *Translation and Literature* 4: 207–218. doi:10.3366/tal.1995.4.2.207.

Downloaded by [American University in Cairo] at 05:53 15 October 2017