The Translator as a Fictional Character in the Works of Arab Women Writers in Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the way in which the character of the translator is depicted in the works of two Arab women writers in diaspora. Specifically, I argue that the protagonist of Arab Australian novelist Nada Awar Jarrar’s *Dreams of Water* (2007) and that of Arab British novelist Sabiha Al Khemir’s *The Blue Manuscript* (2008) find in their profession as translators fertile grounds for questioning their hyphenated identities. In other words, living in-between cultures and working as translators give Jarrar’s Aneesa and Al Khemir’s Zohra an opportunity to explore the possibilities/limitations their in-between positions open for them to contribute to founding and maintaining a common ground for cross-cultural exchange and interaction. At the same time, Aneesa and Zohra are aware of the precarious position they occupy as cultural mediators: each protagonist undergoes processes of acculturation and hybridization that ultimately stimulate her to re-define her identity, re-examine her politics of location and negotiate the incongruities of her daily experiences. Their knowledge of their home cultures and their experiences in diaspora alongside their professional position as translators mediate their understanding of seemingly unfathomable fragmented and fractured lived experiences. The two translators in the two novels realize that their identities are as malleable and mutable as the texts they work hard to faithfully render as transparent, lucid and accurate as possible.

Keywords: Arab writers in diaspora, fictional translators, identity, Nada Awar Jarrar, Sabiha Al Khemir.

1. Introduction

The character of the translator in the novels of contemporary Arab writers in diaspora is quite prominent. The translator is the protagonist in the works of Amara Lakhous, Jamal Mahjoub, Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, Sabiha Al Khemir and Nada Awar Jarrar among others. In these works, Amedeo, Yasin, Rashid El Kenzy, Amal, Sammar, Zohra and Aneesa live between two cultures by virtue of their jobs as translators. Their diasporic experiences hyphenate their jobs as translators. Their diasporic experiences hyphenate their identities and place them in a border zone in which cultures interact and constantly hybridize each other. Their residence in-between cultures endows them with a unique opportunity to explore the multiple layers that form their identities and shape their daily experiences in a world of globalised human movements. For these characters, translation “open[s] up the unavoidable complexities, the historically ingrained problems and prejudices, and the intense day-to-day negotiations that occupy our interwoven global communities” (Sandra Bermann 2005: 2). In other words, these fictional translators live between cultures and help bridge the gap between them. At the same time, their identities are sites over which discourses of acculturation, hybridity and displacement converge.

While the works of Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Aboulela have been investigated by several critics, Al Khemir’s and Jarrar’s recent texts have not received the same attention. Hence, in this paper, I will focus on the character of the translator in Jarrar’s *Dreams of Water* (2007) and Al Khemir’s *The Blue Manuscript* (2008). I argue that in both works, the (female) translator, by virtue of her work, is involved in a self-discovery process that takes the form of investigating her relationship with her cultural past, present and future. Specifically, Aneesa, a Lebanese woman who

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works in London as a translator during Lebanon’s devastating civil war, reflects on how living and working in London have enabled her to look at her identity from a new perspective. Her diasporic experience becomes the catalyst for reconciliation with her war-torn past. Similarly, Al Khemir’s Zohra, a half Tunisian half English woman is reconciled with her hyphenated identity by working as a translator for a team of archeologists on a digging mission in Egypt. Zohra’s job as a translator in an Arab country of a great historical and cultural significance connects her to her roots and makes her appreciate a cultural half of her identity her upbringing in London has mutilated and even erased. Both Aneesa and Zohra live in “[t]he translation zone,” which according to Susan Bassnett (2014: 57), “may be a site of violence and disruption, but which is nevertheless an enabling […] space.” In other words, being a translator gives Aneesa and Zohra the opportunity to move between two cultures and explore the possibility of bringing them closer to each other despite the obstacles that threaten to halt their movements.

While Aneesa’s journey takes her to the heart of Europe, Zohra travels to the heart of the Arab world. Aneesa, a Druze Lebanese who obtained a degree in translation flees the raging civil war to Britain after the loss of a father and a brother. On the other hand, Zohra a daughter of a Tunisian man and an English woman, accepts a translation job in Egypt because she wants to live and work in an Arab country. Yet, in both cases, the physical journey runs side by side with a psychological trip that propels a process of self-inquiry and eventually leads to reconciliation with the past. Through the two translation jobs that Aneesa and Zohra take, the protagonists reconfigure their identities and initiate a self-discovery inquiry. This process of self-discovery differs due to each character’s socio-political circumstances as Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg remind us that “syncretic practices and identities are differently gendered, raced, and classed” (1996: 10). Their identities are certainly “anchored in the politics of history/location,” to quote Lavie and Swedenburg once more, of which their jobs as translators decisively influence their personalities and quotidian experiences (1996: 14). In this sense, Aneesa’s journey to Europe runs parallel to Zohra’s journey to Egypt and in both cases the translator emerges as a dynamic figure who glides gently between the two different cultures.

Since the two women translate from Arabic to English and vice versa, a long history of an ambivalent interest in and hostility to an Arab Islamic culture is conjured up. A history of colonialism and orientalism serves as a paratext that frames the works of “the translator attempting to render into a hegemonic language a language from the Third World” as Henry Staten argues (2005: 115). In other words, everything that Aneesa and Zohra translate “becomes more problematic, more intensely ‘political,’” to use Staten’s words on translation in a postcolonial world (2005: 115). Indeed, Staten’s words echo those of Spivak who argues that the translator of third world women writing needs to be aware of “the fact that there is so much of the old colonial attitude, slightly displaced, at work in the translation racket” (Spivak 1993: 189). Staten’s and Spivak’s comments suggest that translation is a site of power struggle and that it is mediated by socio-political circumstance. In the two novels, the mission of Aneesa and Zohra as translators is mediated by both their gender and ethnic origins, and hence, their positions are informed by cultural conditions that frame the historical relationship between Arabs and Europeans.

In addition to the extrinsic context that frames the translator’s job, translation is an elusive and demanding occupation. In the two novels, the two translators’ journeys are replete with moments of untranslatability. The two translators encounter a number of incidents in which cultural translation seems unattainable, or, to use Spivak’s words, “impossible” (2000: 13). As Harish Trivedi reminds us, “[t]he unit of translation [is] no longer a word or a sentence or a paragraph or a page or even a text, but indeed the whole language and culture in which that text [is] constituted” (2005: 3). In fact, Spivak and Trivedi foreground the difficulties that are inherent in intercultural dialogue, represented here by translation. As translators traverse language barriers, they encounter cultural obstacles that threaten to disrupt their missions. In both novels, Aneesa and Zohra experience the incongruity of translating particular cultural artifacts and concepts and they spare no effort to translate as clearly as possible the texts they are assigned to render from one language to another. Yet, as the two novels illustrate, an easy move from one language to another is by no means guaranteed.

For instance, Aneesa fails to explain to her lover,
Robert, that she cannot tell her mother, Waddad, about him because “Waddad seems immersed in concerns of her own, seeming further away than the distance that separates them” (Jarrar 2007: 96). Robert mistranslates/misinterprets Aneesa’s silence as a rejection of him as a lover. In other words, Aneesa is unable to clearly explicate to Robert that her mother who is suffering from the loss of a husband and a son during the Lebanese Civil War would find it difficult to lose a daughter to a husband who will take her far from her.3 As Aneesa fails to translate this fact to Robert, he declares that Aneesa does not love him (ibid.: 99). Furthermore, Isabel, Aneesa and Robert’s common friend, mistakenly assumes that Aneesa does not take Robert seriously, but rather looks at him as “‘something new and exotic’” (ibid.: 102). In reality, Aneesa feels that Robert and Isabel are “the ideal companions” (ibid.: 94). These incidents of cultural mistranslation are portrayed as unavoidable. They are significant because they shape and re-shape Aneesa’s identity. Thus, it is fair to say that the translation job that Aneesa takes in London crucially impacts her identity since the job gives Aneesa a unique opportunity to communicate with people from different cultures and to experience the fissures and strains that are inherent in cultural translation.

Similarly, Zohra feels frustrated and unsettled whenever she fails to clearly translate whatever she is asked to; she feels feeble, powerless and vulnerable. For instance, Zohra’s inability to translate “Habb ‘azieez” to the team of archeologists she works with makes her feel helpless and useless: “‘Habb ‘azieez,’ said the man as he generously offered them a handful. Zohra was embarrassed because she could not translate” (Al Khemir 2008: 11). In fact, Zohra frequently ponders on the difficulty of translating some peculiar expressions and cultural tokens:

Her task was to reach for similar meanings. She crossed barriers between people of different nationalities and she felt like a ghost among them. But there was also the untranslatable. That which was unique, particular to each language and each culture, there were many moments when she, the translator, felt trapped in that zone, the zone of the untranslatable. (ibid.: 160)

In other words, Zohra’s job as a translator makes her think about her own limitations and the challenges that are intrinsic to cultural translation. It simultaneously makes Zohra realize the weight and magnitude of her job in giving meaning to life and opening corridors of dialogue and new horizons of cultural interactions.

In spite of these moments of sterility and aimlessness, the two novels present translation as a fertile ground for cultural exchanges and interactions. In this context, Lynn Visson argues that “the interpreter is constantly seeking the middle ground of understanding [...] through a rendering that takes cultural context into account” (2005: 62). Visson highlights the role a translator/interpreter plays as a mediator “with a thorough knowledge of both language and culture” (ibid.: 62-63). In other words, the translator’s job is not restricted to rendering the meanings of the words, but rather to provide a cultural context that gives these words a nuanced meaning. In this sense, the translator occupies a middle ground that connects people and brings them closer to each other. Seen from this perspective, the translator is a connoisseur of both the source and target languages and is aware of the historical and cultural contexts that bind the two languages.

In fact, Visson’s emphasis on a translator’s skill to bridge cultural differences is echoed by Al Khemir’s belief in a translator’s ability to halt conflicts and inspire peace. Al Khemir’s novel highlights the fact that a translator can bridge the gap between cultures and resolve misunderstandings, decoding meanings through crossing linguistic and cultural barriers:

‘Four men sat together talking in the market when a coin was dropped among them. They rejoiced at their good fortune. “I will buy some ‘inab,” said the Arab. The Persian objected. “I don’t want ‘inab,” he said, “I want to buy some angur.” The Turk protested. “I don’t want either of those, I want some uzum,” he cried. “Well, I want stafil,” said the Greek. And a fight broke out between them. A gifted translator, fluent in all languages, would have reconciled their argument. He would be able to tell them that each had wanted the same thing – grape.’ (ibid.: 141-142)

The translator in the above episode is skillful and
talented. He easily resolves the conflict because of his ability to glide between different cultures and understand different languages. In the above episode, the translator diffuses escalating tensions and inspires peace, orderliness and harmony.

To elaborate, the role the gifted translator plays in the above anecdote can be likened to that of Arab writers in diaspora. Through drawing on their different cultural heritages, they help reduce cultural differences and prevent conflicts. These Arab authors serve as de facto translators who explain their cultures to the world through the characters they create, the English language they employ and the themes their works explore. Hence, we can stretch the word “translators” in Michael Cronin’s following statement to encompass Arab writers in diaspora. Cronin asserts that “all translators are cultural cosmopolitans, in that going to the other text, the other language, the other culture, involves that initial journey away from the location of one’s birth, language, upbringing” (2006: 11). Indeed, Arab writers in diaspora cross borders and barriers and employ their artistic skills to explicate their home cultures to an international audience. In this sense, like translators, Arab writers in diaspora are cultural cosmopolitans.

In fact, in a study of Arab British novelist Ahdaf Soueif’s The Map of Love, Wail S. Hassan calls the works of Arab writers in diaspora who employ English as a language of writing “translational literature” since they “straddle two languages” and “participate in the construction of cultural identities from that in-between space” (2006: 754). Indeed, Arab authors in diaspora straddle two cultures and skillfully blend their Arab cultural heritage in their writings. Their position promotes, though not unproblematically, a common ground that bridges the gaps between cultures. They inhabit what Ahdaf Soueif calls the Mezzaterra, “a ground valued precisely for being a meeting-point for many cultures and traditions” (2004: 6). In other words, Soueif describes the Mezzaterra as a potentially fruitful contact zone where cultures interact and constantly hybridize each other. With a double vision, Arab writers in diaspora try to bridge the gaps between cultures and to leave corridors of dialogue open. Their beliefs in the potential of an open dialogue and its role in inspiring harmony in the world are prompted by a contrapuntal perspective shaped by their hyphenated identities.

Writers like Nada Awar Jarrar and Sabiha Al Khemir who live between two cultures often have contrapuntal perspectives that “can make connections between quite discrepant experiences” (2001: 94). These authors occupy, to use Homi Bhabha’s words “a third space [...] where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates tension peculiar to borderline existence” (1994: 312). Bhabha invites us to consider how this space “may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (ibid.: 56, italics in original). In this sense, Jarrar’s Dreams of Water and Al Khemir’s The Blue Manuscript portray the experiences of two characters who, by virtue of their jobs as translators, live between two cultures and occupy a space that empowers them to understand and explain the two cultures they navigate.

In this context, one may argue that the titles of the two works foreground the theme of intercultural dialogue. One way to interpret Jarrar’s title is to highlight the optimism inherent in the word “dreams” as opposed to the pessimism inherent in the word “nightmares.” In this sense, the book foregrounds Aneesa’s hopes and aspirations of bridging the gap between the two worlds she glides between thanks to her occupation as a translator. This idea is complemented by the word “water” which represents fluidity and invokes images of transcultural communications and voyages via oceans, seas and rivers. On the other hand, the title of Al Khemir’s book refers to a cultural artifact that belongs to the Fatimid period. Hence, Al Khemir offers her reader an opportunity to trace a cultural product that belongs to the Fatimid period. In this sense, Aneesa and Zohra link worlds that are separated by historical and geographical distances. This attempt to connect cultures and abridge distances between nations reflects a desire by Arab women writers in diaspora to demystify their home cultures and present them to an international readership.

Investigating the works of a number of Arab women writers in diaspora, who write in English, Shereen Abou El Naga describes the literary texts of these women as
“narratives that take place, literally and figuratively, in the contact zone between two cultures” (2002: 60). Abou El Naga maintains that Arab women writers employ a discourse that “emanates from a liminal space, joining a feminist consciousness with a cultural awareness” (ibid.: 60), and hence, it addresses the socioeconomic and political circumstances they experience. At the same time, Arab women writers in diaspora draw on their cultural heritage as Arabs and their experiences as expatriates to express their views from a new perspective that is neither Eastern nor Western. In other words, the discourse that these women use is hybrid, a discourse that accounts for their experiences as Arab women who live in diaspora. Their views, to quote Abou El Naga once more, “admit differences and deal with them from a self-confident standpoint that accommodates a space for self-critique” (ibid.: 60). Through using English words to express their opinions and thoughts, Arab women writers, Abou El Naga maintains, propose “an alternative discourse […] that tries to pave the route for a new understanding, while celebrating native roots at the same time” (ibid.: 60). In this sense, Arab women writers in diaspora straddle two cultures and express their thoughts and opinions on various issues in a democratic manner.

Thus, while Jarrar’s Aneesa and Al Khemir’s Zohra render words from one language to another, they simultaneously open new spaces for cultural interaction and expand human links and connections. As translators, Aneesa and Zohra play a crucial role in facilitating communications among people from different parts of the world by promoting plurality and diversity. In this way, as translators, Aneesa and Zohra, to use Cronin’s words, help maintain “the possibility of dialogue across difference” (Cronin 2006: 72). In the two novels, translation is not only a profession that Aneesa and Zohra take, but rather it is a modus vivendi and an unshakable belief in the possibility of eliminating misunderstandings and maintaining a fruitful intercultural dialogue. In this sense, Dreams of Water and The Blue Manuscript, the two translators’ identities become sites on which varying, and even contesting, cultural dynamics converge. As Bassnett puts it, “the task of the translator is indeed a highly complex one, for it requires negotiation of difference that is both linguistic and cultural” (2014: 10). Thus, the translator’s position is precarious and is in fact encapsulated by the famous Italian saying: “traduttore, traditore (translator, traitor) meaning that translators always betray whatever they are translating” (ibid.: 10). In the two novels, Aneesa and Zohra put up with numerous mental strains, inner conflicts and external disturbances while they are doing their jobs. Their desire to serve as mediators between cultures gives them the stimulus to overcome the hurdles that threaten to disrupt the intercultural dialogue they believe in and constantly contribute to. In Dreams of Water, for instance, Aneesa is torn between her past and present. As she takes a translation job in London, she gradually comes to terms with the tumultuous experiences she has undergone in her life. Her job as translator endows her with a sense of coherence, orderliness and wholeness.

Unfortunately, the works of Jarrar and Al Khemir remain marginal compared to those of well established Arab British and Arab American women writers such Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela and Diana Abu Jaber, to name a few. For instance, although Jarrar published three novels, one of them actually won the Commonwealth Best First Book award for South Pacific and for Southeast Asia, only few critics have discussed her works at length. To be specific, Jarrar published her first novel, Somewhere, Home in 2004; her second novel, Dreams of Water, was published in 2007, while her third novel, A Good Land, was published in 2009. Similarly, Sabiha Al Khemir’s debut novel, Waiting in the Future for the Past to Come, was published in 1994, while her second novel, The Blue Manuscript, was published in 2008. Just like Jarrar’s works, Al Khemir’s novels have not received enough critical attention.

Reviews of Jarrar’s Dreams of Water and Al Khemir’s The Blue Manuscript in newspapers and literary magazines are also scarce. In a review titled “Two Books by Lebanese Women” published in Banipal, a London-based magazine with a mission to promote modern Arab literature, Susannah Tarbush sheds light on Jarrar’s The Dreams of Water. Short as it is, Tarbush’s review places
Jarrar’s novel within a context of “[t]he ongoing uncertainty in Lebanon, and the current tumult of the wider Middle East” which, Tarbush expects, “is likely to increase the international readership of such works” (ibid.: 149). On the other hand, in her review of The Blue Manuscript, Alev Adil laments the fact that “Zohra is emotionally crippled by her shared Tunisian and English cultural heritage” which, the reviewer maintains, indicates that “[t]here is no possibility of a shared oriental-occidental identity” (ibid.: para. 5 of 5). Nevertheless, Adil seems to admire the way Al Khemir “seduces readers with the manuscript’s mythical beauty and the philosophy of its art form” (ibid.: 3 of 5).

Unfortunately, the two reviewers pay scant attention to the fact that both Aneesa and Zohra are translators, and hence, their identities are strongly influenced by their professions. For instance, Tarbush’s review does not touch on the fact that Aneesa’s job as a translator gives her the opportunity to meet new people in Britain who, through sharing with her their experiences, help her better understand her own inner and outer problems. Similarly, Adil’s description of Zohra’s character as fragmented is quite problematic since by the end of the novel Zohra undergoes a substantial transformation that empowers her and makes her look at her hyphenated identity positively. Overall, the two novels foreground the constructive role translation plays in developing the characters of Aneesa and Zohra. The two women are empowered by their cultural heritage and the new experiences they glean as a result of living between cultures and working as translators.

The opening pages of Dreams of Water highlight the prominent role of translators/interpreters. Four-year-old Aneesa tells her mother, Waddad, that her children “wash their hands on their own” (Jarrar 2007: 3). Bewildered, Waddad takes Aneesa by the hand to a sheikh who interprets/translates to her the significance of what the child said. The sheikh declares that “[t]he child has spoken of a past life” (Ibid.: 4). In other words, the sheikh draws on the Druze belief of reincarnation to translate/interpret the episode as Aneesa’s recollection of a past life. Significantly, Aneesa herself grows up to be a translator who traverses tempo-spatial barriers and glides between discrepant cultures. As Aneesa accepts a job offer as a translator in London, she undergoes new experiences that will leave lasting scars on her identity.

To a great extent, Dreams of Water traces the influences of diaspora experiences on Aneesa who lost her brother Bassam during the civil war. Although she escapes to London where she works as a translator, Aneesa remains haunted by her past. Upon arriving in London, Aneesa seems to be anxious, tormented and unsettled:

The novelty of having her own place, however small, does not wear off, even months after moving into the flat [...] It is almost as if this new world, grey and faltering, invites ambiguity, calls her to a place where she has no identity and where nothing is clearly defined. (ibid.: 89-90, emphasis added)

As the above quotation indicates, Aneesa seems overwhelmed by the new life she is about to experience in Britain. She appears to be reduced to an insignificant and a marginalized figure whose identity is controlled by superior powers. Yet, the sense of loss and displacement that Aneesa experiences is diametrically opposed to her job as a translator, a profession that inspires harmony, wholeness and coherence.

This sense of fragmentation and helplessness gradually changes when she meets Salah, a Lebanese widower in his seventies whose son, Samir, has brought to London. The Salah-Aneesa friendship proves fruitful. In fact, under the guidance of Salah’s insightful counsel, Aneesa revisits her past and looks with fresh eyes at her own identity. Salah takes Aneesa out of her isolation through their weekly walks and trips. For Aneesa, Salah represents a lifeline that rescues her from drowning into an unfathomable sea of seclusion and aloofness. In their conversations, Salah and Aneesa frequently discuss how a person can overcome a present haunted by the past. Salah tells Aneesa: “Coming to this city has made me understand many things that I had not been aware of before. It’s made me think of myself in a different way” (ibid.: 45, emphasis added). In fact, Salah translates to Aneesa how his experiences in diaspora have influenced his identity. In this sense, the novel shows how a person’s identity is malleable and subject to change. As Stuart Hall (1990: 235) reminds us, “Diaspora identities are those constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew,
through transformation and difference.” Echoing Hall’s words, Salah’s words help Aneesa adapt and be more open for change. Gradually, Aneesa’s network of friends expands and her life becomes more vibrant.

Significantly, while diasporic experiences help transform identities as Salah suggests, Aneesa’s work as a translator helps her break a self-imposed exile and improve her links with people around her. Her friendship with Isabel, a fellow German-French translator, motivates Aneesa to think about the similarities that connect both of them. The two of them meet for the first time in the translation office they both work for: “‘I suppose you come into the office for a bit of company just like I do?’ Isabel asks between mouthfuls” (Jarrar 2007: 91). Aneesa’s reaction is quite telling: “Aneesa feels comforted at having her own feelings expressed so clearly but says nothing” (ibid.: 91). In this sense, translation is the space that literally and metaphorically closes gaps between people and brings them closer to each other. For Aneesa, whose life seems to be determined by her “fragile [and] wavering self” (ibid.: 46), chatting with Isabel makes her identify with other people and think of the commonalities that she shares with them:

It is a pleasant chat, filled with the kind of innocuous friendly conversation that Aneesa has not really had in a long time. She is heartened at the thought that this young woman does not see her as being in any way different from herself and hopes they will see each other again. (ibid.: 92, emphasis added)

To sum up, the physical space of the translation office both Aneesa and Isabel work for becomes a site where the two women discover their commonalities, and hence, strengthen their camaraderie. As the two women translate documents, they translate to each other their own experiences of alienation, displacement and detachment.

Working as a translator and living in diaspora give Aneesa enough space to investigate her own identity and to contextualize her experiences. In other words, Aneesa’s residency in London and her job as a translator can be seen as “a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes,” to quote the words of Avtar Brah on diaspora space (1996: 181). In this sense, Aneesa’s identity is a site where cultural, historical and social issues converge with her job as translator. In fact, Aneesa’s job as a translator in diaspora opens a window for her to look at her role as a cultural mediator. The novel depicts translation as a catalyst for a process of self-inquiry and investigation. Eventually, Aneesa comes to terms with her past after a series of experiences that she undergoes in Britain while working as a translator.

It is through living in diaspora that Aneesa is reconciled with her identity:

Now as she attempts to adjust to a new life, Aneesa recognizes similarities to those earlier years. But this time there is gratification associated with her separateness, a sense that she finally gained control over her destiny and it is her will alone that can direct it. (Jarrar 2007: 94, emphasis added)

In fact, the translation job that she took abroad has substantially influenced Aneesa’s life and made her certain about her future plans. Her final conversation with her lover, Samir, is quite revealing. Aneesa is assertive and self-confident:

When Aneesa tells Samir that she cannot go back with him, he is surprised at how easily he takes her refusal and wonders if he didn’t half expect it. He asks her why she will not come and she replies with a question of her own. Why don’t you stay here instead, Samir? We can make a home here together (ibid.: 221).

Evidently, Aneesa is finally reconciled with her place of birth. Aneesa’s lived experiences in London as an immigrant and her job as a translator have both contributed to this reconciliation.

One way to comprehend the changes that Aneesa has undergone during the course of the novel is to look at Cronin’s words on the interconnectedness of translation and immigration:

The condition of the migrant is the condition of the translated being. He or she moves from a
source language and culture to a target language and culture so that translation takes place both in the physical sense of movement or displacement and in the symbolic sense of the shift from one way of speaking, writing about and interpreting the world to another. (Cronin 2006: 45, italics in original)

Cronin rightly points out that both translation and immigration are inextricably connected. They both involve a movement from one place to another and entail a transformation that has enduring consequences on the people involved. It is a shift that implicates a cultural exchange and a reconfiguration of the way one perceives his/her identity. Living as a migrant and working as a translator, Aneesa’s character witnesses a transformation in the way she positions herself and conceptualizes her identity in an increasingly globalized and shifting world.

If living in diaspora enables Aneesa to understand the important role she plays as a cultural go-between, then the experience of living and working in Egypt as a translator for a team of archeologists commissioned to dig out a tenth century Fatimid manuscript gives half Arab half English Zohra a great opportunity to connect to her roots and explore a cultural heritage that her Tunisian father has failed to present to her in an appealing manner. As Al Khemir’s protagonist arrives in Cairo in the company of the team of archeologists, Zohra has the power to understand what people in a Cairo café say:

The café swarmed with words. Words mingled in a shower of chatter that bathed them warmly. Shards of conversations surfaced, but only Zohra, the translator, caught them. The others did not speak Arabic and Mustapha was preoccupied with his calculations. (Al Khemir 2008: 1)

As the above quotation shows, the translator is the only person who is capable of transforming foreign sounds into meaningful words. Zohra’s job as a translator privileges her over the rest of the people in the café because she is the only person who comprehends what others are saying in both languages. As a translator, Zohra always likes to “pass unnoticed” (ibid.: 184). She does not want to “leave any personal mark on what she translate[s]” (ibid.: 161). In fact, she is quite aware of her role as a person who navigates multifarious cultures and continually attempts to link them: “‘I have constantly tried to connect worlds, I am constantly facing that fear of the other, never running away from it’” (ibid.: 161).

Nevertheless, Zohra feels that because she is half Arab half English, she is a fragmented and a split person, always an Other. This is quite apparent when Zohra reflects on her social life and marriage:

Everyman showed an interest in her was in harmony with only one side of her, not the other. Her mother accused her of being ‘too Arab’ when emotions gushed out unexpectedly. She was ‘too English’ for her father when she showed reservation and planning. (ibid.: 136)

Indeed, Zohra is aware that “[h]er name was pronounced differently in different worlds” (ibid.: 12). Being half Arab half English, Zohra has trained herself not to be attached to a particular geographical spot:

Zohra always liked being in a car or a train, perhaps not so much for itself as for the comforting feeling it brought. Of being in-between. That was how she always felt. Half-half. Rarely did people want to know about both halves, about her other half. (ibid.: 49)

In fact, Al Khemir’s representation of Zohra in the above quotation corresponds to Nitsa Ben-Ari’s argument in her study on the representation of translators in popular culture where there is an emphasis on “hybrid identity, double loyalty and dissatisfaction with being ‘just’ a translator/interpreter” (2010: 230). At one point, Zohra dreams of becoming a writer who produces own books, not a go-between: “[t]he role of the intermediary was strange. It had become dissatisfying for Zohra. For years she had dreamt of writing a book of her own” (Al Khemir 2008: 50, emphasis added).

Although Zohra senses that this translation job is going to be different since her previous translating jobs were based in England while this job is based in an Arab country, she feels frustrated and anxious because she is ignorant of her Arab-Islamic cultural heritage. She feels
unhappy about the idea that she knows nothing about the Blue Manuscript: “Zohra was perplexed. She so much wanted to ask what the Blue Manuscript was. Was it something everyone should know?” (ibid.: 1). Working as a translator for the team of archeologists, Zohra gradually feels more and more attached to the Arab-Islamic culture:

That night Zohra found it difficult to sleep. For her, these old objects were carriers of her history and her ancestors kept her awake. The present mediocrity of her father’s mundane reality juxtaposed with the sophistication of his culture’s past. As the dig went on, Zohra felt that they were digging within her as much as in the earth. (ibid.: 210)

As the above quotation indicates, Zohra’s connections to her Arab-Islamic half are being restored. Her job as a translator with the team of archeologists has opened new horizons for her, especially with regard to the way she conceptualizes her own hyphenated identity.

Simultaneously, Zohra becomes aware of how her history is being mistranslated by some unqualified ‘specialists’. In fact, Zohra feels helpless as she listens to some unjust explanations and postulations from non-Arab ‘experts’ on Arab-Islamic culture and arts. Dr. Evans, whose knowledge of Arabic is rudimentary, gives inaccurate information about Arab-Islamic culture as she mistranslates the philosophy of Arab-Islamic arts:

She [Zohra] was intrigued by everyone else’s theories, by the archaeologists’ complacency in inventing stories about the past. She thought there was nothing wrong with that, except that they seemed to be so confident they were reconstructing history while in fact they were sometimes piecing together supposition. (ibid.: 210)

Dr. Evans’s interpretations of some of the Arab-Islamic artistic patterns are both simplistic and crude. In other words, in translating Arab-Islamic arts, Dr. Evans does not, to borrow Spivak’s words on a translator’s mission, “inhabit, even if on loan, the many mansions, and many levels of the host language” (2005: 93). In this sense, Dr. Evans mistranslates Arab-Islamic artistic patterns in a way that exposes her own ignorance and lack of respect for the culture she purports to be an authority on.

This explains Zohra’s reaction to Dr. Evans’s one-dimensional comments on the Arab-Islamic relic she is investigating. Zohra is infuriated and indignant because she helplessly listens to a false interpretation:

‘She is supposed to speak Arabic’, thought Zohra, ‘a significant tool for the study of Islamic art history, but her knowledge of it seems pretty limited!’ She sent the art historian an indignant look. ‘She speaks Arabic with a strong accent and thinks about the culture with an even stronger accent,’ Zohra’s look seemed to say. (Al Khemir 2008: 128)

In response to Dr. Evans’s naïve comments, Zohra decides to work hard to understand her Arab-Islamic culture and to explore a cultural half of her identity she has not adequately probed. As a translator, Zohra, to paraphrase Lawrence Venuti’s statement on translation and nationalism, “identif[ies] unconsciously with a national cultural discourse” that has been dormant since her birth (2005: 183). Zohra’s decision to immerse herself in the Arab-Islamic culture heralds a new phase in her life in which she resurrects an Arab-Islamic half of her identity that she has ignored and rendered inferior to her British half.

In fact, once she returns to London, Zohra earnestly reads books about Arab-Islamic arts:

Ever since she had returned to London, Zohra had been obsessively reading about Islamic art. She learnt a great deal about its variety and wondered why it was called ‘Islamic Art’. The name denied its rich diversity. Zohra read more specifically about manuscripts, about ‘codicology’, as Dr Evans would call it. (Al Khemir: 289)

Significantly, Zohra’s interest in studying Arab-Islamic arts is accompanied by a reassessment of her own
identity as a cultural hybrid. She starts to think about her identity with fresh eyes. She looks at it, to use Hall’s words, as a “production” within, not outside representation” (Hall 1990: 222). For Hall, as for Zohra, identity is defined by “the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity [...] by hybridity” (ibid.: 235). Zohra’s job as a translator has helped her reach reconciliation with herself, and hence, conceptualize her identity in positive terms.

Working with the team of archeologists in Egypt harmonizes the two seemingly diverse halves that make up Zohra’s identity:

As she discovered Islamic civilization through its visual expression, it was as though the Eastern side of her had come to know itself, and at the same time the Western side came to see the Eastern. She felt she had bridged the gap between the two [...] The excavation had changed her vision of her roots, of what her Arabic name was linked to. It led her to discover what was part of her but which she had never known. (Al Khemir: 294)

A feeling of satisfaction and settlement replaces a sense of fragmentation and alienation that Zohra has always experienced in her life. Zohra’s reconciliation with an Arab Islamic culture from which she was disconnected is encompassed by her ability to envisage herself walking down an alleyway in Wadi Hassoun “tracing the tenth-century steps, connecting [...] stories, a humanness that cut across time and space” (Al Khemir: 211). For Zohra, at last a ubiquitous sense of belonging and wholeness substitutes a lifelong feeling of rupture and estrangement.

To conclude, in the two novels, translation is remedial and therapeutic. As translators, Aneesa and Zohra cross barriers and connect discrepant worlds. At the same time, the two women come to terms with their past experiences and hyphenated identities thanks to the professions they have chosen. In the works of Nada Awar Jarrar and Sabiha Al Khemir translation is presented, to quote Spivak once more, “not only necessary but unavoidable [and...] impossible” (1993: 21). Spivak rightly points out that “[t]he impossibility of translation is what puts its necessity in a double bind. It is an active site of conflict, not an irreducible guarantee” (2005: 105). As the two translators in Jarrar’s Dreams of Water and Al Khemir’s The Blue Manuscript strive to render meaning clearly, they enter into a dialogue with their selves, discover the fertility of the space they occupy as cultural mediators, and throw the door wide open for readers to consider the possibility for finding a common ground for different cultures.

The two translators in the two novels set sail on an odyssey that brings about a sense of self-fulfillment and satisfaction. Although Aneesa’s journey is north-bound and Zohra’s journey is south-bound, the two translators begin a self-quest journey through which they both realize the significance of the key role each plays as a cultural translator. For both characters, translation, which essentially involves rewriting and reordering linguistic and cultural differences, to paraphrase Venuti, “links multitudes, often in the most unexpected groups” (1998: 4). While Aneesa’s experience as an Arabic language translator in diaspora brings about her reconciliation to a past that witnessed the loss of a father and a brother and the disorientation of a mother during a raging civil war, Zohra’s experience as a translator for a team of archeologists commissioned to dig out a tenth century relic in the Egyptian desert enables her to discover a cultural heritage that she has ignored as a result of growing up in London. For Aneesa, who notably does her translation work “at the small table [...] which she also uses to have her meals” (Jarrar 2007: 89), translation is a conduit for survival: it is as indispensable as the food she eats. Similarly, for Zohra the translation job in Egypt “had changed her vision of her roots, of what her Arabic name was linked to [...] she felt directly connected to the Blue Manuscript” (Al Khemir 2008: 294).
NOTES

(1) Significantly, in the works of these authors, women translators outnumber men peers. Lakhous’s Amedeo in Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Pizza Vittorio (2006) and Yasin and Rashid El Kenzy in Mahjoub’s Travelling with Djinns (2003) and historical novel The Carrier (1998), respectively are Arab men who work as translators in Rome, London and seventeenth-century Jutland.

(2) The works of Lakhous and Mahjoub are beyond the scope of this study because in this paper I examine only the works of Arab women writers in diaspora.

(3) In addition, Aneesa is unable to explain the Druze belief of reincarnation to Robert. Aneesa cannot explain to Robert that her mother, Waddad, believes that she has found her dead son, Bassam, reincarnated in Ramzi, an eight-year-old boy abandoned in an orphanage.

(4) See Mirapuri 2009 and Hout 2012.

(5) See Omri 2006.

REFERENCES


The Translator as a Fictional …


يشمل البحث تحليلًا نصيًا لشخصيات المترجمة في أعمال الكاتبات العربيات في المهجر. كما يتناول هذا البحث توضيح الدور الذي تلعبه وظيفة الترجمة في تكون الهوية الثقافية للشخصيات الرئيسية في رواية الكاتبة العربية الأسترالية ندى أعرور جرار "حلم الماء" (2007) ورواية الكاتبة العربية البريطانية صيحة الخمير "المخطوط الأزرق" (2008). ومن خلال دراسة نقدية وقائمة دقيقة للنصوص، فإن هذا البحث يصور الدور الذي تلعبه عملية الترجمة في إدراك الشخصيات الرئيسية في الأعمال الأدبية (نديمة وزهيرة على التوالي) للدور الملحي على عناصرها لتقييم وجهات النظر بين الحضارة الإسلامية والحضارة الغربية من خلال الترجمة.

الكلمات الدالة: الكاتبات العربيات في المهجر؛ الهوية الثقافية؛ المترجم كشخصية في النصوص الأدبية.