



LITERATURE

## THE ART OF TRANSLATION

Ambassadors for authors, tour guides into foreign realms, translators broaden minds and markets beyond the borders of individual writers. *By Catherine Bolgar*

*Illustration by Wissam Shawkat*

If books open new worlds to us, translations take us to worlds far from our own. How often do we think about the act, or the art, of translation? We celebrate composers like Elias Rahbani, as well as performers like Fairouz, who interpreted his music. If authors are like composers, then translators are like musicians, using their skill and creativity to bring the original to new audiences.

Sawad Hussain, a teacher and prize-winning translator of *Passage to the Plaza* by Sahar Khalifeh, *Catalogue of a Private Life* by Najwa Bin Shatwan coming this autumn, and *Mama Hissa's Mice* by Kuwaiti novelist Saud Alsanousi, sees translators as chauffeurs. "The author has one route. I'm picking up a bunch of passengers and we're going to the same destination but we're taking a different route. It might have different landmarks."

In *Mama Hissa's Mice*, for example, a character lisps, and Hussain at first included the lisp in the translation, but "it became a decoding exercise for the reader. So I made him stutter. The point was that a traumatic event affected his speech pattern."

Paul Starkey, the scholar, translator and chair of the judging panel for The 2020 Saif Ghobash Binipal Prize, sees a literary translation as a "mirror image of the first work but it still has a creative element behind it. If you don't have artistic flair, then you would be better to do commercial translation."

Jonathan Wright, a journalist and translator of many prize-winning books, including *Jokes for the Gunmen* by Mazen Maarouf, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi, and *God 99* by Hassan Blasim, says, "I like to imagine that I produce something like the book the author would have written if he/she had been bilingual in English. Of course there's a complicated set of impossible assumptions in that, but we translators use our imaginations and put hard work into trying to overcome them and bridge the gap. It's much easier to produce a good translation of a good book than it is to write the good book in the first place, so the author must always take pride of place."

Translators are essential ambassadors for authors and their publishers. Few make a living from translating and, adding insult to injury, they sometimes are barely acknowledged.

"I still think that those publishers who refuse to put translators' names on the cover are just wrong. We are co-authors, co-artists. Publishers say it'll put readers off," says Marilyn Booth, scholar and translator of such prize winners as *Voices of the Lost* by Hoda Barakat, *Celestial Bodies* by Jokha Alharthi, and *Points of the Compass* by Sahar Tawfiq.

Book sales mostly held steady during the pandemic. Although translations make up only about 3% of books published in English, sales from afar provide vicarious travel, now more than ever.

"I always considered translation as an attempt to deepen our cultural understanding towards a new planet, without barriers and prejudices," says Osama Esber, poet, writer, publisher and translator of works by Toni Morrison, Michael Ondaatje, Terry Eagleton, Richard Ford, Bertrand Russell, Nadine Gordimer, Noam Chomsky and others. "Arab writers were influenced by good translations...Literary translation is a step to deepen writing and open new vistas for it. It contributes to a round table of dialogue between writers across the cultural barriers."

He cites the example of French poet Saint-John Perse, who was translated by two great poets: T.S. Eliot for English and Adonis for Arabic. "These are two great poets who translated a great poet. What is the result: a great translation," Esber says. "The way you use language is an important sign of a good translation. If you possess the language and know how to utilise its magic, you will be able to express the rhythm, emotions, and the voice of a foreign text, and here the other becomes the self, an exchange of roles."

Booth and Hussain read original and translated passages aloud to feel their cadence. A natural rhythm helps readers, Wright notes, and his news experience has taught him how "a slight rearrangement of a sentence can add massively to its clarity."

<b>PAUL STARKEY</b> "Nobody translates out of their native tongue. You translate out of your second language into your native one. I've been writing in English all my life. There's no way I'll get my written Arabic to that standard."	<b>SAWAD HUSSAIN</b> "You have to do a lot of editing, compared to other languages. The editing practice is improving, but editors are undervalued in the Arab publishing world."	<b>JONATHAN WRIGHT</b> "The choice of an appropriate English word depends on the context, not on the Arabic word—who is doing what to whom, what were they talking about, what is the power relationship between them?"	<b>MARILYN BOOTH</b> "We can only think about reality through words in our head. The way societies segment reality through language is crucial. It's a nightmare for translators but also really important."	<b>OSAMA ESBER</b> "Translation helps us to see the other through his creative identity. This puts us in a different position, the position of listening, seeing and embracing the other through the intimacy of his creative self."

Like any art, translation has rules, fashions, challenges. One rule: respect the author's voice. "Sometimes I feel the writer dictates to me in Arabic. If I lose his/her voice, the translation will not be good. In poetry, the mission is harder, you have to be able to use language in a way that can embrace the voice and rhythm of the poet, who writes in a foreign language. It is as if you are walking on the edge of a cliff, but you should walk," Esber says. Adds Wright: "If you spend three months in the company of a fictional character, the character takes on a life of its own and starts to speak. The translator just has to listen, and it comes."

It isn't always easy. For Badria Al-Shihi's *The Girdling of Embers*, a historical novel that takes place aboard a boat from Oman to Zanzibar, Hussain struggled to convey the sailors' rough language. "If I went with something similar in English, it might sound like *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and that is not where you want the characters to go," she says.

The pendulum of how much of the original language to retain is swinging towards more, sometimes with an explanation of the foreign term in the context, but sometimes not. Readers are increasingly open to foreign words, even if they don't understand them. The old fashion of translating everything stripped out the foreign flavour that transports the reader. A reviewer panned one of Hussain's early translations for being too Westernised. Now she incorporates Arabic terms strategically, aware of the risk of jarring the reader, saying, "I don't mind if you feel uncomfortable."

Arabic, the native tongue of more than 200 million people, with about two dozen dialects, poses a special challenge. In the language of literature is Modern Standard Arabic, or MSA. Because life plays out in dialect, some authors mix dialect and slang with MSA or write completely in dialect. Translators must decide how to express that.

MSA "is not the mother tongue of anyone on this planet," Wright says. "There's a massive price to pay for that. For a start, it excludes as potential writers the maybe 70% or 80% of the population who can hardly write MSA and the 50% or so for whom it is a great effort to read. It also excludes a whole domain of language that is close to people's daily lives and emotions...Some writers use MSA with extreme abandon, revelling in conceits and obscure words that many readers will not recognise. Others write in a rather cold, predictable and stereotypical way. Of course there are writers in Arabic who have used the language to great effect and their achievements are even more remarkable since they have been working with their hands tied behind their backs. But, for a translator, it's often hard to handle the flights of verbal fancy that some MSA writers insert into their texts and, on other hand, to resist the temptation to liven up the slightly bland language of other texts."

Regional differences, Starkey notes, are such that "if the book is in Iraqi dialect, then Egyptians would have trouble understanding it and it's not going to have wide appeal. That's a problem for writers as well."

Making novels available to a wider market is an important benefit of translation for authors. But it's hard to get publishers' attention, especially if the publisher doesn't have staff who can read the original or who attend book fairs in different regions. Publishers favour sure things, so Palestinians are expected to write about intifada, Syrians and Iraqis about war, Arab women about being oppressed. Hussain is shopping an out-of-the-box science fiction novel from Mauritania, called *The Outsider*, by Ahmed Isselmou. She struggled for two years to find a home for *A Bed for the King's Daughter*, an eerie microfiction collection by author Shahla Ujayli of Syria. It came out with University of Texas Press in January.

"All the publishers I approached said, 'it's too avant-garde, not Arabic enough, too much surrealism'," she says. "This is a short story collection that has been singled out by critics in the Arab world; shouldn't that be enough for you to take interest?"

Literary prizes boost translations' thin budgets. The Man Booker International Prize went to the first Arabic novel in 2019—*Celestial Bodies*, written by Jokha Alharthi and translated by Booth. The Sharjah Book Authority funds the annual AED1.3 million Turjuman Award for books in translation, to get Arabic works into the hands of non-Arabic readers. The International Prize for Arabic Fiction, sponsored by the Emirates Foundation in Abu Dhabi, goes to the best novel in Arabic each year, with \$50,000 for the winner plus translation into English.

"In the last 20 years, it's amazing how it's changed," Booth says. "There's so much more buzz about translation now."

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