

Patrons and the Translation of Arabic Fiction into English: Guilty Until Proven Otherwise

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Abstract—Translating contemporary Arabic fiction into English gained momentum after the Egyptian novelist, Naguib Mahfouz, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. However, this activity and the ensuing translated output, have been considered the outcome of the negative hidden agendas adopted by the patrons who commission the translations. Indeed, these patrons have been branded as repressive agents that advocate orientalist views since the fiction they select for translation reinstates the stereotypical images of the Arabs, and hence fulfills the Anglo-Saxon readers' expectations and the patrons' financial aspirations. This paper attempts to look at the other side of the coin and considers the positive role patrons have played in translating contemporary Arabic fiction into English.

Index Terms—patrons, contemporary Arabic fiction in English translation, hidden agendas, reader expectations

I. INTRODUCTION

Translating contemporary Arabic fiction into English is a relatively new enterprise that started after Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian novelist, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. This international recognition was indeed the spark that ignited Anglophone publishers' interest in Arabic fiction which was "neglected" and "embargoed" in the West (Said, 1994; Allen, 2003; among others).

However, publishers' interest in disseminating translated Arabic literature to English readers remained cautious in the late eighties and early nineties, and hence did not drastically change the bleak scene that existed before Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize. Two main reasons helped in maintaining the status quo. First, Arabic literature continued to be under-reviewed, and the invisible status it had acquired over the years did not help in transforming it to be "part of world literature" (Clark, 2000, p. 3). Consequently, the number of literary works translated into English remained miniscule, and the recipients were mainly a niche readership interested in Arabic literature and/or the Arab world. Second, publishers' commercial and sociopolitical agendas played a pivotal role in determining the kind of works selected for translation. To ensure satisfactory commercial circulation and to arouse English readers' interest in the translations, many publishers chose to translate works that reinforce the stereotypical images of the Arabs and the Arab world widespread in the West. In such a setup, the literary worth of the chosen work(s) was of secondary importance to publishers, and the domestic cultural values (Venuti, 1995) prevalent in the West about the Arabs governed publishing houses' selection criteria.

Although this translation scene, characterized by its ethnocentric orientalist orientation, gradually began to change during the second half of the twentieth century and the subsequent years, many researchers, academics and translators still believe that the factors governing the selection criteria remain unchanged.

Such a stance seems to ignore the positive role Anglophone patrons have played over the years in disseminating Arabic fiction to English-speaking readers. The paper, therefore, attempts to look at this neglected role in order to show that the patron-Arabic fiction in translation relationship does not always correlate in a negative way.

II. PATRONAGE AND THE TRANSLATION OF ARABIC FICTION: AN OVERVIEW

Patronage was a deeply-rooted societal system practiced in Europe as early as the 14th century. In Florence, for example, patronage was conducted by the church and was "key to social status" (Biagioli, 1993, p. 15). During the Tudor and early Stuart period "patronage affected all aspects of English social, economic, and political life" (Marotti, 1981, p. 207). Today patronage is still implemented in different guises by institutions worldwide, but it is no longer a firmly entrenched societal behavior.

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1995) gives two definitions for patronage: (1) "the support, especially financial support, that is given to an organization or activity by a patron;" and (2) "a system by which someone in a powerful position gives people generous help or important jobs in return for their support" (p. 1038). Support, therefore, is initiated by a patron, who assigns a mediator to perform a certain activity in his/her service. Different entities have assumed the role of patron, and these entities have triggered negative and positive associations regarding the notion of patronage. In Translation Studies, patronage is a relatively new phenomenon that was introduced by Lefevere in the 80s and later developed in the 90s. According to Lefevere (1992), patronage is

“something like powers (persons, institutions) that can further or hinder the reading, writing, and rewriting of literature” (p. 15). In embracing such a definition of power, Lefevere emphasizes that he adopts the Foucaultian sense of power which is not mainly a “repressive force” but one that “traverses and produces things, induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse” (p. 15). The positive dimension of power is highlighted and patronage takes on a positive, productive role in the literary system.

Patronage can be carried out by a diverse body of patrons, such as individuals, political and religious parties, publishers, and the media, to name but a few. Lefevere (1992, 2000) indicates that patronage subsumes three elements: the ideological, the economic and the social. If the same patron is in charge of dispensing all of the aforementioned components, patronage is undifferentiated and aims at enforcing the dominant literary canons prevalent in the literary system. If, however, the three components are not wholly interrelated and are not carried out by the same patron, patronage is differentiated. It follows that the undifferentiated vs. differentiated categorization delimits the patrons’ responsibilities and impacts the translated output they present to the target text audience.

The translation of Arabic fiction into English is undertaken by a number of patrons that include publishing houses, magazines and websites. They are mainly responsible for choosing the works for translation as well as the translators that perform the commission. Patrons can sometimes be indirectly involved in the selection and translation process when they are advised by directors of literary projects to translate specific Arab authors. Most of the patrons involved in the translation of Arabic fiction into English have Anglophone affiliations and are mainly based in the US or UK, with a few exceptions like the American University in Cairo Press (AUCP) which is based in Egypt. The publishing houses, the first to initiate this translation activity and the party that commissions the majority of the translations, are divided into three distinct groups: the commercial, the independent and the academic. The first two groups have a commercial interest in the promotion of translated Arabic fiction and constitute large, medium and small-sized presses; examples of these presses include Bloomsbury Publishing, Penguin Books, Doubleday, Three Continents Press, Quartet, Haus Arabia Books, Garnet and Interlink. The third group is comprised of university presses or university-based presses that do not have commercial goals and are genuinely interested in the dissemination of Arabic fiction to an English-speaking audience; they are mostly based in the US (Bühler & Guthrie, 2011), and the leading academic presses engaged in the translation of Arabic fiction include Syracuse University Press, Columbia University Press and Texas University Press.

Although all the patrons who commission the translation of Arabic fiction into English have been criticized for a number of reasons, publishing houses have received the lion’s share of criticism from an array of specialists working in the fields of Arabic literature and Translation Studies. The criticism has mainly focused on the factors that govern the patrons’ selection criteria, the financial “rewards” the patrons aspire to gain and the tense patron-translator relationship.

The selection criteria embraced by publishers with regards to the translation of Arabic fiction into English has been criticized by researchers, academics and translators alike. Booth (2008, 2010) explicitly articulates her standpoint on this issue by coining the term “Orientalist ethnographicism” to describe the mechanics that Anglophone publishers adopt in selecting and translating Arabic fiction into English. To Booth (2010), “Aesthetic grounds have rarely been the basis for choosing texts for publication; rather, domestic political concerns and economic interests have been paramount in this particular literary marketplace” (p. 155). Therefore, the selection is anything but innocent and is loaded with hidden agendas that maintain the publishers’ financial satisfaction and the English readers’ expectations.

Along the same lines, Bühler and Guthrie (2011) conclude after conducting a study on the translation of Arabic literature into English that “there are still not enough translations published from Arabic, and that, with some exceptions, interest in books coming from the Arab world is determined by socio-political factors rather than by the desire to explore the literary culture of the Middle East and North Africa for its own merits” (p. 6). The study reiterates the negative role played by the publishers who undertake the task of translating Arabic fiction into English; however, the aforementioned researchers have to be given credit for mentioning *en passant* that there are “some” publishers who do not embrace negative agendas when translating Arabic fiction into English.

Taking Rajja AlSanea’s novel *Girls of Riyadh* as his point of departure, Ware (2011) claims that it is “virtually impossible” to examine how Anglophone readers receive translated Arabic fiction “outside the tentacles of geo-political power” (p. 56). To attract English readers, and to entrench the image widespread in the West about the Arabs in general, and Arab women in particular, *Girls of Riyadh* “boasts a striking pink and purple cover dotted with handbags, hookahs, fast cars and stilettos” (p. 59). The cover page design, in addition to the excerpts added on the cover from newspaper reviews, like “Love and lust, men and money. A taboo-breaking, bestselling tale of sex and the city,” bring to mind the stereotypical images of the Arabs and reinforce the notions of backwardness and frivolity that the West ascribes to the people from the Arab world.

Translators have also voiced concern about the kind of fiction that gets translated from Arabic into English and the selection criteria adopted by Western publishers to fulfill this endeavor. Cobham (quoted in Bühler & Guthrie, 2011) states that “Readers as well as publishers tend to go for content above literary/poetic quality in the case of Arabic literature, and look for and comment on how the society and especially religion and gender relations are portrayed in the literature” (p. 32). Allen (2010) reiterates Cobham’s view and concurs that the choice of Arabic fiction translated into English when initiated by a Western press “seems to be very much based on the “what” of the novel’s content rather than the “how” (p. 16). Talib (quoted in Qualey, 2013b) believes that the prejudiced English readers steer the publishers’ choices and indirectly dictate the kind of Arabic fiction that gets translated into English. According to Talib,

this scenario takes place because “there is a hostility in the reader’s mind to characters who don’t fit particular stereotypes” (<http://arablit.wordpress.com/2013/11/04/translation>).

Tresilian (2008) echoes Arab publishers’ concerns about the “problems of selection” that are involved in the process of translating Arabic fiction into English. Arab publishers blame their Western counterparts for translating works that are not representative of the Arab scene or fail to give a true picture about Arabic literature. Their point of view indicates that even in the Arab world people interested in the translation of Arabic fiction into English have expressed concern about what gets translated.

Western publishers have also been accused of giving too much weight to the financial benefits they aim to accrue as a result of translating Arabic fiction into English. In this regard, Böhler and Guthrie (2011) emphasize the “commercial imperative” and the “economics of translation” that influence the translation and marketing strategies adopted by publishers to ensure “successful” dissemination of translated Arabic fiction (p. 12). They contend that these publishers are “so duty-bound to their shareholders that they take no risks” (p. 43). Booth (2010) also indicates that commercial publishers’ selection of Arabic fiction is “subject to the search for commercially successful works and popular political pressures to produce information about certain identity categories often conflated in public discourse: Arabs, Muslims, Middle Easterners” (p. 155). Clark (2000) acknowledges that publishers want to keep losses to a minimal and that “commercial calculation gets in the way of the dissemination in English of the best Arabic literature” (p. 4). Thus, it follows that in order to secure commercial circulation and minimize financial risks and losses, publishers select to translate the Arabic fiction that reveals certain aspects of the culture that are intriguing to a Western reader and benefit the Anglophone readers’ “horizon of expectations” (Jauss, 1982); such “commercial calculation” helps confirm readers’ perception of Islam, Arab women and the Arab world at large.

Publishers’ involvement in the strategies adopted in the translation of the works chosen has also received its share of criticism. Qualey (2010) recounts Davies’ experience with a publisher who refused to publish a work Davies had translated because “the author’s voice did not sound how the publisher had expected an Arab woman would sound” (<http://www.belletrista.com/2010/issue6/features>). Booth (2008, 2010) talks disparagingly of the approach Penguin and Rajja AlSanea, author of the novel *Girls of Riyadh*, adopted in retranslating the version she had produced. She (2008) states that the “revisions made by the press and author to her translation domesticate the text and mute the novel’s gender politics” (p. 197). According to Booth, the revised end-product facilitates the marketing of the novel, minimizes financial losses and makes it a best-seller in the West. Wright (2013) expresses his dissatisfaction with Knopf Doubleday and Alaa Al-Aswany, the author of *The Automobile Club*, for shifting to another translator, without giving Wright prior notice, justifying their decision on grounds that Wright’s translation was “unsatisfactory.” Translators’ experiences indicate that when publishers and authors impose a translation strategy, they do so to fulfill specific agendas that facilitate the promotion and marketing of the translated work.

If the role of the publishing houses, involved in the translation of Arabic fiction into English, is viewed within the confines of the criticism directed at them, it can be said that the patronage exerted by these patrons is mainly undifferentiated since the approach adopted in the act of translating Arabic fiction aims at disseminating a literary end-product that can be “accepted” and “actively promoted” because it meets the expectations and biases of the receiving Anglophone audiences (Lefevere, 1992). Patronage, under such circumstances, has negative connotations and patrons can be looked upon as a body endowed with a “power” that “hinders the reading, writing and rewriting of literature” (p. 15). Such a perspective only looks at the status quo from one angle and fails to see the picture in its entirety. Patrons under this scenario are accused of misrepresenting the Arabs and their fiction, and are therefore considered guilty until proven otherwise.

III. PATRONS AND THE TRANSLATION OF ARABIC FICTION: A POSITIVE RELATION

The literature that discusses Arabic fiction in English translation mainly portrays the patrons who fund and commission the enterprise as agents that “hinder” and “suppress” the “rewriting” of quality Arabic fiction in English because they wish to fulfill two goals: (1) meet the expectations of English-speaking readers; and (2) ensure financial gains. The negative responsibility of the patrons is emphasized and the positive role they have played in disseminating Arabic fiction to Anglophone readers is ignored. Indeed, the productive role these agents have assumed has not been investigated thoroughly, and to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, a handful of specialists have identified other participants that have been involved in the present state of affairs regarding translated Arabic fiction in English.

In a talk entitled ‘Through the Looking Glass: Orientalism and the Translation of Arabic Literature,’ Suleiman (2014) considers that the orientalist views advocated by publishers should not always be looked upon as the sole driving force underlying the selection of Arabic fiction that gets translated into English. He acknowledges that orientalism has been overemphasized in discussions that tackle the kind of Arabic literature that gets translated into English and adds that other issues that are at play in the process have been disregarded.

Other specialists have explicitly specified the forces responsible for the status quo. Creswell (as quoted in Qualey, 2013a; emphasis original) considers reviewers “**the real culprits**” that have to be blamed for what kind of Arabic literature gets translated, why and who chooses the translations. To Creswell, the wrong choices are made because the number of reviewers interested in Arabic literature is scant.

Allen (1994) and Davies (quoted in Tresilian, 2012) state that in the initial stages of translating Arabic fiction into English, translators were held accountable for the works that got translated. Because Western publishers lacked expertise in Arabic literature, translators were asked to recommend the Arab authors whose works are worthy of translation into English. Publishers in this scheme were not directly involved in the selection criteria.

To Büchler and Guthrie (2011), the Arab world itself has participated in hindering the translation of Arabic literature into English because it “has done very little to promote its own writing internationally and even less to support its translation” (p. 8). It follows that the Arabs themselves have contributed to the paucity of Arabic literature in translation.

Exposing the involvement of parties other than publishing houses in the selection of Arabic fiction that gets translated into English, suggests that the patrons’ negative contribution in the translation activity of Arabic fiction might have been overemphasized at the expense of the constructive role they have assumed and which revolves around two interrelated axes. The first axis is concerned with the increase in the number of publishing houses involved in the activity and the ensuing surge in the titles translated; the second is associated with the kind of fiction that publishing houses commission for translation.

A. *Publishing Houses and the Dissemination of Translated Arabic Fiction into English*

The role publishing houses have played over the years in disseminating translated Arabic fiction to English-speaking readers should not be overlooked nor should it be discussed entirely within the framework of orientalism and financial rewards. In fact, by adopting an approach that is not based on preconceived ideas about these patrons, their invaluable contribution to this activity can be fully appreciated.

The Nobel Prize for Literature award aroused Anglophone publishers’ interest in Arabic literature, in general, and Arabic fiction in particular, and acted as an eye-opener to the diversity of works produced in the Arab world. Consequently, the circle of publishers involved in the translation of Arabic fiction into English gradually began to widen which resulted in an upsurge in the number of works translated.

Before the award, the responsibility of translating Arabic fiction into English was mainly the pursuit of university presses affiliated to academic institutions and interested in disseminating quality Arabic fiction to Middle East specialists and a well-read Western audience; the financial rewards incurred from such an activity were not the driving force underlying the translation of Arabic fiction (Said, 1994; Allen, 1994; Clark, 2000; Büchler & Guthrie, 2011). The university presses that contributed to the translation of Arabic fiction in its beginnings were mostly scholarly institutions based in the US, such as Columbia University Press and Texas University Press. *The Literature of Modern Arabia* published by Texas University Press in 1988, and sponsored by the Project for the Translation of Arabic (PROTA), is considered a work that was a valuable addition to the limited repertoire of translated Arabic fiction in English.

The early nineties, and subsequent years, saw more publishers involved in the translation of Arabic fiction, and this is why Allen (2003) considers that this period “represented some kind of heyday in the publication of contemporary Arabic literature” (p. 3). One feature associated with the abovementioned period is that more university presses in the US and UK became convinced it was the right time to venture on such a project, and names of presses affiliated to the following universities were seen more frequently on translated anthologies and novels: Syracuse, Columbia, Arkansas, Indiana, California, Georgetown, York, Minnesota and Oxford. Some of the translated works by these presses include: *All That’s Left to You: A Novella and other Stories* (1990), *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* (1992), *Fragments of Memory: A Story of a Syrian Family* (1993), *The Journey of Little Gandhi* (1994), and *The Game of Forgetting* (1996). Another university press that began to play a pivotal role in the translation of Arabic fiction into English is the American University in Cairo Press (AUCP). The press has become “the major source of Arabic literature in English worldwide, and has launched the international career of several major Arab writers” (Büchler & Guthrie, 2011, p. 27).

Another significant development that started in the 90s was the increase in the number of independent and commercial publishers involved in the translation of Arabic fiction. The independent publishing houses, comprised of small and medium-sized presses, accept narrow profit margins and are primarily interested in acquainting English-speaking readers with the literature and culture of the Arab world. The fiction they choose to translate is not the sole responsibility of the marketing departments, but is carried out by personnel who are well-acquainted with the literary scene in the Arab world and who aspire to translate fiction that has literary value. One can say that the approach independent presses adopt in translating Arabic fiction is succinctly summarized by Quartet publishers on their website: “our publishing continues to be risk-taking but with a sharp eye towards the zeitgeist” (<http://quartetbooks.co.uk/about>). The independent presses that participated significantly in disseminating Arabic fiction in the aforementioned period include: Quartet, Anchor, Haus Arabia, Interlink, Kegan Paul, Lynne Rienner, Garnet, and Zed. The fiction they translated was not confined to Egyptian novelists and short story writers, but included works from other parts of the Arab world, and readers in the West were introduced to names whose works had already gained acclaim in the Arab world, like Liana Badr and Ghasan Kanafani (Palestine), Ulfat Idlibi (Syria), Ghazi Algosaibi and Abdelrahman Munif (Saudi Arabia), Ibrahim Nasrallah (Jordan), Al-Tayeb Salih (Sudan), and Ahmad Faqih (Libya), among others.

The turning point in the role publishers played in translating Arabic fiction was the participation of commercial presses in the activity. Commercial publishers, as the name suggests, are interested in profits and the “commercial imperative” comes first on their agendas. They focus on translating fiction that sells well which means that priority is

given to the works that portray the stereotypical images of the Arabs; the literary quality of the translated works is not always the criterion adopted in the selection process. Having said this, one cannot ignore that such presses have participated, though to a lesser extent in comparison with university and independent presses, in translating Arabic fiction that has literary value, such as the works by Naguib Mahfuz and Yusuf Idris. Some of the major commercial presses to partake in the translation of Arabic fiction include: Doubleday, Three Continents Press, Bloomsbury Publishing, Penguin Books, and Random House.

The increase in the number of publishing houses that commission and fund the translation of Arabic fiction into English resulted in an upsurge in the works translated. This end-result is noted in both the UK and the US where translations from Arabic were once “scant”, “sparse” and “limited” (Allen, 1994; Said, 1994; Clark, 2000; B uchler & Guthrie, 2011).

A report by *Literature Across Frontiers* (2011), that examines the literary translations carried out from Arabic into English in the UK and Ireland between the years 1990-2010, reveals that interest in Arabic literature started to go up in the 90s. In 1990, for instance, there were seven literary works translated from Arabic; however, the number doubled in ten years to reach 14 in 2000. A further increase in the works translated into English was noted after the 9/11 events with over “30 titles published in 2010” (p. 23); in twenty years, the number of titles translated quadrupled which indicates the growing interest in the Arab world and its literature. Not only did publishing houses increase the number of titles translated, but they also included novels and short stories by a diverse body of men and women writers from all over the Arab world; consequently, many works like *Zayni Barakat* (1990) by Gamal Al-Ghitani, *Dubai Tales* (1991) by Mohammad Al-Murr, *The Story of Zahra* (1991) by Hanan Al-Shaykh, *Wiles of Men and Other Stories* (1992) by Salwa Bakr, *The Stone of Laughter* (1994) by Hoda Barakat, *Bandarshah* (1996) by Al-Tayeb Salih, *Gold Dust* (2008) by Ibrahim Al-Koni and many others, saw the light of day in English because publishing houses took marketing risks and funded the translation of such literary works.

In the US, translations from Arabic have also increased during the twenty-first century. Qualey states that “Arabic has gone from de facto English-language invisibility to the “fourth-most-translated” literary language in the US” (<http://arablit.wordpress.com/2014/07/08/arabic-strongly-represented-in-2014-pen-awards>). In his attempt to upgrade the translation databases at Three Percent, Post (2014) notes that the number of novels and short stories translated from Arabic into English has gone up in 2014 with close to 30 titles appearing in English. The works chosen are written by novelists and short story writers from different Arab countries and are published by academic, independent and commercial presses.

Taking into consideration that only around 2-5 percent of the literary works in circulation in the West are translations (Allen, 2010; B uchler & Guthrie, 2011), one can say that publishing houses have not turned a blind eye to Arabic literature. On the contrary, the amount of works they have participated in translating during the last twenty-four years is anything but peripheral if compared with the translated literature from China, Sweden, Japan and Portugal (Qualey, 2014). Publishing houses in the West, and presses located in the Arab world with Western affiliations, have succeeded in introducing the English-speaking public to a fair amount of Arabic fiction in English translation. Consequently, readers have become more conversant with the literary scene in the Arab world and more informed about its culture. Publishing houses’ interest in translating Arabic fiction into English and the ensuing output show the overarching role these patrons have played in disseminating Arabic fiction to a non-Arab readership. One cannot but acknowledge that without their efforts and risk-taking measures Arabic literature would still be in the ghetto.

B. Publishing Houses and the Translation of Quality Arabic Fiction

The patrons, or publishing houses, that choose the Arabic fiction that gets translated into English are usually accused of selecting works that reveal certain aspects of the Arab culture that are intriguing to Western readers. The titles they commission for translation are usually “taboo-breaking” bestsellers that openly discuss sex issues, freedom, democracy and religion in the Arab world, and hence reinstate the stereotypical images of the Arabs familiar to readers in the West. Although such an approach is adopted by some patrons, not all of the presses that oversee the translation of Arabic fiction follow the same path; some of them are involved in this endeavor out of genuine interest in Arabic fiction and its literary value. It goes without saying that quite a few works that have been translated into English by various publishers do not portray Arabs in their conventional roles, and the selections discussed in this section are examples that do not fit the mould.

The available corpus of quality Arabic fiction in English reveals that academic, independent and commercial presses have all been involved in this activity. Academic presses, especially in the US, have significantly contributed in disseminating quality Arabic fiction to Anglophone readers. Columbia University Press, for example, in *Modern Arabic Fiction: An Anthology* (2005) introduces readers to works by more than one hundred and forty Arab novelists and short story writers from all corners of the Arab world. The anthology reflects the diverse range of themes, subject matters, styles and tones tackled by novelists known in the West, like Naguib Mahfouz and less known novelists and short story writers, such as Jurgi Zaydan, Liana Bader, and Nadia Ghazzi. Indeed, the literary richness of Arabic fiction is reflected in the anthology.

Another academic press, with American affiliations, that has shown unprecedented interest in the translation of quality Arabic fiction into English is the American University in Cairo Press (AUCP). AUCP sometimes publishes twenty new literary titles every year (B uchler & Guthrie, 2011, p. 27) which is an output unmatched by any other press,

be it academic or otherwise. Although some suggest that AUCP “goes for quantity rather than quality in its selection” (p. 27), the works translated reveal that at least a good part of their choice is certainly of excellent literary value (see <http://www.aucpress.com/c-26-arabic-literature>). AUCP is not only the primary English-language publisher of Naguib Mahfouz’s novels, but has translated works by other renowned writers like Taha Hussein, Yusuf Idris, Yahya Hakki and Gamal Al-Ghitani. The role it has played in acquainting Anglophone readers with novelists and short story writers of different Arab nationalities is exceptional. Works by Ibrahim Al-Koni (Libya), Abdelilah Hamdouchi and Leila Abouzeid (Morocco), Mourid Barghouty and Sahar Khalifeh (Palestine), Ibrahim Nasrallah (Jordan), Hassouna Mosbahi (Tunisia) Fadhil Al-Azzawi (Iraq), and Tarek Altayeb (Sudan), to name but a few, are made available to Western readers. Many of the works written by these writers, and selected for translation, do not portray the Arabs in their conventional roles and have, prior to their translation, gained acclaim in the Arab literary circles. For example, in *I Saw Ramallah* (2005), the Palestinian novelist Mourid Barghouty reveals in his autobiographical account of his return to the homeland after 30 years of exile, the sufferings of Palestinian refugees and the impact of the occupation on their families. His narrative is not biased against the Israelis; there is neither bitter reproach, nor testy resentment in the tone of the narrative. Palestine has been occupied, renamed, its inhabitants evicted from their homes, yet the roaming homeless narrator manages to find a home in Deir Ghassanah where he had been born.

Independent presses have also translated quality Arabic fiction into English. Interlink Books, Garnet Publishing, Quartet, Haus Arabia, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Pantheon Books, Vintage and Passeggiata Press, among others, brought international reputation to Arab novelists and short story writers. Two of the novels by Hanna Mina, a Syrian writer, have been made available in English translations by Interlink and Passeggiata Press. Neither *Fragments of Memory: A Story of a Syrian Family* (1993) nor perhaps *Sun on a Cloudy Day* (1997) meet the expectations of a Western audience, hungry for salacious information about an alien and mysterious culture, or an insight into the role of women. Jensen (<http://www.aljadid.com/content/hanna-mina%4>) concurs that “the use of highly poetic and formal language, the somewhat surreal disclosure of the plot, and the questionable treatment of women could potentially present roadblocks towards appreciating this novel. But for a sensitive, astute reader, its personal and political “coming of age” tale offers a powerful glimpse of the passion which allows humans to revolt against the most oppressive circumstances.” *Sun on a Cloudy Day* is set just before Syrian independence from the French mandate. The narrator is the son of a decadent wealthy aristocratic family who collaborates with the French colonial power, the occupiers, out of sheer egotism, and to maintain a stale status quo. The novel chronicles the coming-of-age story of a young man’s search for identity. He moves away from the elegant tango, which his family dances at any occasion, to the gypsy sword dance, which he learns from a tailor, a radical nationalist, who becomes his mentor when he recognizes the narrator’s passion in his search for the meaning of life. His father eventually murders the tailor for introducing change.

Betool Khedairi’s *A Sky So Close* (2001) published by Pantheon Books, a novel that gained an important status after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, is about youth, about growing up in a war-torn country, and about cross-cultural differences. A young woman looks back on her life with an Iraqi father, whom she adores, and an English mother, at the vast abyss between the two cultures of her parents, the blackouts forced on her town during the war, and her coming of age amidst all this. Khedairi’s novel does not meet the Anglophone readers’ “horizon of expectations” on a number of counts, most importantly the father-daughter relationship which is not characterized by patriarchal domination and oppression. In short, the novel tackles other issues, for it “represents a microcosm of the east-meets-west battle, a tiny and personal war, which, in this story, has no clear winner” (Roberts-Zibbel, 2002).

Ghassan Kanafani, a Palestinian short story writer and novelist, whose repertoire of works in Arabic is extensive, has been translated and published in English by Lynne Rienner Publishers and Interlink. His works deal with the sufferings and misery of the displaced Palestinian people, and their aspirations for the normality of a dignified family life that most take for granted. *Palestine’s Children: Returning to Haifa and Other Stories* (2000) comprises fourteen stories that mirror the life and sufferings of Palestinian children. Each story narrates the life of a Palestinian child who is suffering due to the political circumstances emanating from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Kanafani’s narrative does not discuss issues usually associated with this conflict: bloodshed, war, terrorism, and hatred; rather, the human dimension of the Palestinian children’s sufferings is the main theme of all the stories. Kanafani retells the sufferings of the Palestinian children living in refugee camps, the dire financial circumstances that these children have to survive, and the human relations that exist in the camps.

Although commercial presses are business-oriented patrons, and the “commercial imperative” is a priority on their agendas, they have participated in publishing quality Arabic fiction in English translation. Heinemann, Doubleday and Three Continents Press are considered pioneers in initiating the translation of this literary genre to Anglophone readers. Heinemann was the first to commission the translation of Al-Tayeb Salih’s novel *Season of Migration to the North* in 1969, three years after its publication in Arabic. Doubleday and Three Continents funded the translation of titles by prominent Arab novelists like Tawfik Al-Hakim, Naguib Mahfouz, Yusuf Idris and Yahya Taher Abdullah. Titles translated into English by these writers include, but are not limited to, *Return of the Spirit* (1990), *Palace of Desire* (1991), *The Mountain of Green Tea and Other Stories* (1991), *The Harafish* (1994), and *The Sinners* (1995). These titles do not conform to the kind of fiction that commercial publishers usually embrace and which is grouped under the taboo-breaking, bestselling models. *The Mountain of Green Tea and Other Stories*, for instance, by Yahya Taher Abdullah is not an easy read collection of short stories. On the contrary, since the stories portray the ordeal experienced

by Upper Egyptians who move to Cairo looking for work, they “demand from the reader considerable background knowledge of the customary life of rural Egypt and the conventions, taboos and traditions that rule the lives of his characters” (Young, 1985, p. 369). This characteristic entails extra processing effort on the Western readers’ part and might result in marketing problems and financial losses; an outcome that commercial presses try to avoid.

Other commercial publishing houses that have introduced Arab voices to English-speaking readers are Bloomsbury, Penguin and Random House. Although they have mainly been associated with the translation of best-selling Arabic fiction, one cannot overlook the serious contemporary Arabic fiction they introduced to an English-speaking audience. For example, the first Arabic novel to be translated by Penguin in 1990 was *Zayni Barakat* by Gammal Al-Ghitani which is a historical fiction set in Mameluke Egypt. Nkhrumah (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/733/profile.htm>) describes it as “a story replete with political intrigue and chivalry. An intricately woven saga of passion and power, it delves into the darker recesses of the mediaeval mind while also tackling contemporary themes.” Selecting such a novel for translation involves risks since this “saga” does not fit the mould Western readers are accustomed to. Bloomsbury has funded the translation of *Beirut 39: New Writing from the Arab World* (2010) which is a collection of 39 short stories and novel extracts by writers from all over the Arab world. Although “many of these worlds are alien to British readers,” Bloomsbury undertook the translation of the collection and ignored the “commercial imperative.” (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jun/12>). These presses have also translated fiction that gained acclaim among Arab and non-Arab literary circles and was shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, like *In Praise of Hatred* (2006) by Khalid Khalifa, *The American Granddaughter* (2010) by Inaam Kachachi and *An Iraqi in Paris* (2010) by Samuel Shimon, respectively.

This brief survey of the quality fiction that Anglophone publishers have introduced to English-speaking readers reveals that the relationship between publishing houses, or patrons, and Arabic fiction in English need not always be viewed with a suspicious eye. Publishing houses have played a pivotal role in introducing serious contemporary new voices of Arab novelists and short story writers to non-Arab speakers in a relatively short period of time if one takes into consideration the limited corpus of translated Arabic fiction available in English during the eighties and early nineties.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Interest in translating contemporary Arabic fiction into English started to gain momentum after Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian novelist, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. Before the Prize, the repertoire of Arabic fiction in English translation was almost nonexistent and was the preserve of a niche readership.

The patrons who commission and fund the translation of contemporary Arabic fiction have been accused of embarking on this venture for the wrong reasons. Researchers, academics and translators have claimed that the selection criteria adopted do not give prominence to the literary quality of the titles chosen for translation but are dictated by the hidden agendas that the patrons embrace. Since Arabic fiction in English translation mainly attracts a niche readership, agents choose works that reinstate the stereotypical images of the Arabs in order to facilitate the promotion and circulation of the end-product to a wider English-speaking audience; this, in turn, means fewer marketing campaigns and less financial risks. Consequently, the patrons that undertake the responsibility of translating Arabic fiction into English are portrayed as a “power” that acts as a stumbling block to the dissemination of Arabic fiction to Anglophone readers. The patron-Arabic fiction in translation relation triggers negative connotations because it is not conducted out of interest in the literature and its people.

This paper aims at showing that while the negative patron-Arabic fiction in English translation relation has been overtly highlighted, the positive role these patrons have played in disseminating Arabic fiction to English-speaking readers has not been given due attention. The paper illustrates that patronage in the translation of Arabic fiction is not always a “repressive force” but one that “traverses and produces things, induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse” (Lefevere, 1992, p. 15). Anglophone publishing houses, whether academic, independent or commercial, did not only participate in increasing the number of titles translated from Arabic into English but they also helped introduce quality Arabic fiction to a wide spectrum of English-speaking readers. The kind of works translated have acted as an eye-opener to the richness and diversity of Arabic fiction, and readers have become acquainted with a new portfolio of translated titles that do not solely portray the stereotypical images of the Arabs with which the Western reader is familiar. The efforts of all the publishing houses that have participated in translating contemporary Arabic fiction into English have transformed this literary text-type from its *tabula rasa* status into a genre that is read and appreciated by a wide array of non-Arab readers.

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