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Review

Political Struggle and Cultural Resistance in Translated Arabic Novels: (Re) representing the Self

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Th[e] whole notion of a hybrid text, the issues of exile and immigration, crossing of boundaries—interest me for obvious existential and political reasons. There are certain figures who are most important to me, renegade figures, who transform marginality into a kind of passionate attachment to other peoples […] who were able to go from one side to the other, and then come back.

A hybrid text is a text that results from a translation process. […] Although the text is not yet fully established in the target culture (because it does not conform to established norms and conventions), a hybrid text is accepted in its target culture because it fulfils its intended purpose in the communicative situation (at least for a certain time).

In the above two quotations, Edward Said and Charles Schäffner consider a translated test as a regenerating hybrid force of liberation, openness and moral, human (re)assessment of traditions and codes of conduct. While Said argues that 'translated Third World literature are projects of writing back, revising, reappropriating', Schäffner describes the 'the relationship between the intercultural communication and translatory action as positive and progressive'. Both authors describe the 'hybrid text' as a method of comparative exploration of intercultural connections and the overlapping of socio-economic interests worldwide, suggesting that a hybrid text can establish a bridge between the marginalized and the centre or between the self and the Other. This essay focuses on the representation of female characters in four translated Arabic novels by the Egyptian novelist Alaa al-Aswany and the Palestinian novelist Sahar Khalifeh, as a form of cultural resistance to both the Western stereotypical and colonial representations of Arab women as subordinate and over-sexualized and Arab phallocentric cultures portraying women as obedient wives and mothers with no public roles. It argues that the novels of the two authors not only bear witness to the realities taking place in their societies but also represent these realities as new images and traditions resistant to Western and native marginalization of women as subordinate Other. The selected translated texts not only speak for the long-silenced Arab Other, but also connect politically and intellectually with the Other worldwide.

Keywords: Political Struggle, intercultural connections, socio-economic interests worldwide, Translation

INTRODUCTION

In his article 'Palestinians under Siege', Edward Said encourages modern translators on both sides, Western

and Eastern, to launch a 'war of words' against 'imperialist and patriarchal cultural systems'.[1] Said argues that translated Arabic works can both be 'an intelligent and useful thing to promote better understanding of our language, our experience, our senses of self and others' and 'a resistance to the images that confined [us] to spaces designed to reduce or stunt us'.[2] According to Said, the art of translation works as 'a sign of cultural protest against discrimination'.[3] Said proposes his theory of contrapuntalism as a 'comparative' literary reading 'fully sensitive to the reality of historical experience'.[4] It relates the literary representations and translations of worldwide cultural contacts to the historical realities within which such representations and translations are produced. Said believes that literature has direct connections with many other aspects of life—political, social, and cultural—all of which go to make up its 'worldliness'. The text's 'worldliness' stands for its 'writer's social identity and how it involves and represents culture and orthodoxy'.[5] However, Said does not deny the subjectivity and independent voice of the writer, the critic or the translator. Rather, Said's aim is to investigate the cultural and intellectual bases of the permanently hostile feelings and relations among different races and societies, particularly those conditioned by imperialist contact.

The aim of this essay, then, is to utilize Edward Said's theory of contrapuntalism to discuss a selection of translated Arabic novels from a cultural point of view. This essay focuses on the positive side of translations of Arabic literature into English and other languages, arguing that such translations not only display the development and positive struggles of Arab women against marginalization and to get equal rights with men, but also contribute to the worldwide, humanist struggle against oppression and discrimination. The methodology adopted in this paper is comparativism. It compares different epochs including religion, culture and politics in modern Egypt and Palestine.

Translation as an Emancipatory Force

In *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said investigates the intimate relationship between imperialism and Orientalist studies, literature and translations. Said argues that not only did Orientalist studies and literature stereotype the Orient as being 'so low, barbaric, and antithetical as to merit reconquest' and to be civilized by the superior West, but also represented sex, particularly 'feminine penetrability',[6] as a means of criticizing Oriental men's attitudes towards women as 'under-humanized, backward, barbaric'.[7] Such very negative and submissive images of colonized women, who are victimized by their men, by convention and by religion, in the case of Islam and who, at the same time, are an object of lust and seduction, establish the colonized female as inferior and appropriated.

However, Said highlights the fact that although the Arab woman in general and the Palestinian woman in particular play a pivotal role in daily struggles against oppression and work hard to support their families, she 'is subordinated and victimized principally because she is a woman in Arab, Muslim society, or because she is a Palestinian'.[8] It is a double process of marginalization where sexuality and political identity are inseparable. In *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*, Fatima Mernissi echoes Said when she asserts that 'in the Arab societies where seclusion and surveillance of women prevail, the implicit concept of female sexuality is an active concept' arising 'from the assumption that woman is a powerful and dangerous being'.[9] In representing working, educated and active women who appear in public and travel alone worldwide, al-Aswany and Khalifeh deconstruct both the Orientalist images of the secluded, lustful Oriental women and the traditional roles of Oriental women as subordinated mothers, wives and sisters. Al-Aswany's and Khalifeh's women play important roles in the developing events of the novels and take the initiative to gratify their unfulfilled desires, including their emotional needs.

The Choice of Al-Aswany and Khalifeh

This essay focuses upon four translated Arabic novels, namely Al-Aswany's *Yacoubian Building* (2002) and *Chicago* (2008) and Khalifeh's *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant* (2002) and *My First Love* (2010), attending to these works' representation of the development of female characters' perception of their cultural affiliations and nationalist filiations. I have chosen to focus on the selected novels of for two major reasons. First, the two novelists are internationally-recognized intellectuals.

[1] Edward Said, 'Palestinians under Siege', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 22, No. 24 (December 2000), pp. 9-14, p. 12.
[2] Said, 'Palestinians under Siege', p. 12.
[3] Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 260.
[4] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. xxix.
[5] Edward Said, *The Word, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 12.
[6] Said Edward, *Orientalism* (Now York: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 206.
[7] Said, *Orientalism*, p. 172.
[8] Edward Said, *After the Last Sky*: Palestinian lives / Edward W. Said; photographs by Jean Mohr. (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 78.
[9] Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Wiley, 1975), p. 10.

Their writings attract wide attention and their engagement with the political crisis in the Arab world in general and in Palestine in particular are obvious. While Al-Aswany portrays the chronic cultural and political upheaval and corruption in Egypt, Khalifeh shows how the incessant and bloody conflicts between the Palestinians and the Israelis keep alive hostile feelings and violent confrontations in occupied Palestine. Yet, both novelists use their works to deconstruct colonial stereotypes in both the Oriental and Western societies. Their selected novels, though they take place under different political and social systems, share a concern with the relationship between political struggle, cultural stereotypes and integration, by focusing on the causes and rights of women and deprived classes, against the prevalence of 'sectarianism, class differences and the mentality of the security state rule'.[10]

Finally, the selected novels are widely translated. To date, *Yacoubian Building* has been translated into 23 languages while *Chicago* has been translated into 11 languages. Likewise, Khalifeh's *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant* and *My First Love* are each translated into 11 languages, including Hebrew. Said believes that 'getting into a foreign language is always a victory for the writer. Always and in each case' and that 'Arabic-to-Hebrew translation is a far more useful thing than the craven 'normalization' of the various Arab countries that have trade and diplomatic relationships with the enemy even as the Palestinians are being killed like so many flies by the Israeli army and air force'.[11] In the light of Said's ideas, this essay focuses on the cultural benefits of translating the novels of Al-Aswany and Khalifeh, rather than investigating technical or contextual problems of the translations themselves.

Economic Female Agency and Female Sexuality in *Yacoubian Building* and *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant:* Redefining Female Nationalism

In *The Politics of Translation*, Gayatri Spivak argues that 'translation is the most intimate act of reading [as] the translator earns permission to transgress from the trace of the other—before memory—in the closest places of the self'.[12] Such a transgressive process is perceptible in *Yacoubian Building* and *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant.* This part of the essay compares the representation of economic female agency in Al-Aswany's Yacoubian Building and Khalifeh's The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant. It focuses particularly on the women's economic independence in the two novels and its role in endorsing progressive, resistant awareness of women's rights and their historic roles in the struggle of their countries against apartheid and discrimination.

Patriarchal Orders and Female Subjugation in *Yacoubian Building*

In *Yacoubian Building*, Al-Aswany traces the life experiences of Busayna el Sayed, a young Egyptian woman who works to support her brothers and sisters after the sudden death of her father. Through Busayna, Al-Aswany approaches Egyptian women's causes from a universal perspective, relating them to worldwide challenges of globalism, capitalism and discrimination. Although Busayna's father held a respectable governmental post, his pension does not meet the family's needs. Being uneducated, Busayna's mother works as a domestic servant while educated Busayna works as a salesperson. Impoverished by the corrupt economic and social institutions of the Mubarak regime, the family faces 'deteriorating living conditions like the majority of middle and lower classes in Egypt during the last twenty years', which, according to Saad Nagi, result from 'the weak accountability, favouritism and lack of knowledge and/or commitment to the ethics of public service, which has opened the gates for pervasive corruption'.[13] The World Bank's World Development Report (2000/2001) concludes that although 'GDP grew by about 8 percent', marginalized classes in Egypt suffer as:

> They live without fundamental freedoms of action and choice that the better-off take for granted. They often lack food and shelter, education and health, deprivation that keep them from leading the kind of life that everyone values. They also face extreme vulnerability to ill health, economic dislocation, and natural disasters.[14]

Aswany treats the economic stagnation of the post 1952-revolution Egypt, a stagnation that has contributed to the

[10] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 122.
[11] Edward Said, 'Defiance, Dignity, and the Rule of Dogma', *Al-AhramWeeklyOnline*, Issue No. 534 (May 2001), p. 13.
[12] Gayatri Spivak, *The Politics of Translation* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 180.
[13] Saad Nagi, 'Poverty in Egypt: Concepts, Realities, and Research Agenda', *Social Research Center* (Cairo: American University in Cairo, 2001), p. 12.
[14] 'Attacking Poverty: Opportunity, Empowerment, and Security', *The World Bank's World Development Report 2000-2001* (Washington, 2001), p. 1.

wretched lives of an increasing number of the poor whose very survival often leads them to moral and cultural degradation. Taha el Shazli, Busayna's lover, fails to be accepted into the Police Academy because his father is the poor doorman of the *Yacoubian Building.* Discriminated against for his low social status, Taha joins an extremist group in order to 'fight the unfair society', to later fall a victim to the violation of police officers. Sheikh Muhammad Shakir, the radical Imam of the subversive movement, advocates terrorism, including jihad martyrdom to overcome 'economic discrimination' and 'the state's revolting lies'.[15] Busayna likewise suffers in being exposed to patriarchal forces that construct women as sexual objects. She is sexually harassed and abused by her employers who see her body as 'unowned' and therefore 'huntable'.[16] Ironically enough, Busayna's mother advises her to 'submit' to her employers' desires in order to 'survive'.[17]

Busayna stands for Arab women living within a phallocentric culture, in which hypocrisy and flawed moral logic lead them to 'dwell in a state of bodily estrangement'.[18] Busayna has to 'belong to' a man in order to feel safe and protected. While Taha stereotypes her as a pure, innocent and obedient girl, other men see her as prey. Evelyne Accad argues that 'sexuality often works together with what may appear as more tangible factors—political, economic, social, and religious choices. It is part of the psychological, physical, and spiritual aspects of human existence'.[19] Accad's argument is applicable to the case of Busayna and Dawlet el Dessouki, another female character in *Yacoubian Building*. While poor Busayna is surrounded by sexual and moral sieges, condemnation and exploitation, Dawlet, being aristocratic, is free to have sexual relations with different men without being socially condemned.

As Busayna, like thousands of young Egyptian people, believes that 'money begets money and poverty begets poverty', and wants 'to go a decent country, where there's no dirt, no poverty, and no injustice',[20] she also resists both religious fundamentalism and the sexist economic order in Egypt. She neither wears the Hijab to satisfy her lover, nor turns to prostitution to survive. Rather, Busayna's persistent attempts to find a respectable job come to fruition when she finds work as a secretary for an aristocratic engineer, Zaki el Dessouki. Zaki is seen as a symbol of a collapsing aristocracy of origin in the face of the new aristocracy of money. Failing to stand up for the political and economic changes of his time, Zaki, 60 years old, resorts to drinking and sex to escape reality. When Zaki tries to harass Busayna, she refuses to submit to his sexual desires and insists that they marry. Abuse neither turns Busayna into an anti-social person like Taha nor does she submit to corrupt powers. Despite the fact that the society stereotypes Busayna as a vulnerable poor woman, her work and education increases her awareness of her rights and respect to her body. Thanks to her work, Busayna 'began to live carefree and happy, though poor' and describes her love for Zaki 'as calm and deep-seated, something closer to peace of mind, and confidence, and respect'.[21]

In his article, 'Yeats and Decolonization,' Edward Said perceives that the fatal mistake of many post-colonial and post-apartheid societies is that they 'replaced the colonial force with a new class-based and ultimately exploitative force; instead of liberation after decolonization one simply gets the old colonial structures replicated in new terms'.[22] Said's trenchant analysis is borne out in the searing political and social critique of al-Aswany's *Yacoubian Building.* Yet, 'the verisimilitude of the problems in the lives of Al-Aswany's characters', as Charles Grippi puts it, 'transcends the boundaries of Egypt. They become worldwide'.[23]

Integration in *Yacoubian Building,* therefore, exceeds the class reconciliation symbolized in Busayna's and Zaki's marriage; it stands for the birth of hope in the ability of the middle and poorer classes and the real aristocracy to face the challenges of corruption and despotism, and to lead a revolution of change. Al-Aswany concludes the novel with the observation that: 'Busayna in her wedding dress looked like some 'Egypt's curse is dictatorship and dictatorship inevitably

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[15] Alaa Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, translated by Humphrey Davies (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2006), p. 96.

[16] Lucy Graham, 'Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Jun., 2003), pp. 433-444, p. 439.

[17] Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, p. 23.

[18] Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *In Search of Walid Masoud*, translated by Adnan Haydar (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. 129.

[19] Evelyne Accad, 'Sexuality and Sexual Politics: Conflicts and Contradictions for Contemporary Women in the Middle East', *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Eds. Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Ann Russo. (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1991), p. 243.

[20] Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, p. 210.

[21] Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, p. 188.

[22] Edward Said, 'Yeats and decolonization,' *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 74.

[23] Charles Grippi, '*Readings in Retirement* : The Yacoubian Building', *SCCC*(Boston: Suffolk University ' 2001), p. 1.

wondrous, pure, newborn creature and that she had rid herself forever of the blemishes of the past that through no fault of her own had tarnished her'. She realizes that leads to poverty, corruption, and failure in all fields'.[24] Busayna's economic resistance against oppression reshapes her intellectual perception of her rights as a woman and her nationalist action as a lower-class member of society.

Palestinian Nationalism and Female Symbols in *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant*

The central issue of class oppression in *Yacoubian Building* is replaced by racial oppression in Khalifeh's novel, *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant*, where Palestinian Maryam al-Katan defies her family and returns from Brazil to live in her own country. Although her family emigrates to Brazil to escape oppression and violence, Maryam feels 'lost and her identity undercut'.[25] In Palestine, Mariam loves Ibrahim, a public school teacher, who, like Taha in *Yacoubian Building*, idealizes her as a symbol of the land, as the bearer and upholder of traditions and customs and as a reservoir of lost Palestinian culture. NiraYuval-Davis indicates that 'gendered bodies and sexuality play pivotal roles as territories, markers and reproducers of the narratives of nations and other collectivities'.[26] M. Badawi agrees with Davis explaining further that 'gendered constructions of national identity [for] meanings of nation are permeated with notions of masculinity and femininity'.[27] In commenting on his love to Maryam, Ibrahim says:

> I don't know exactly when and how I came to love Maryam. Perhaps I was simply dazzled by that atmosphere, by a magic and inscrutability in the scene itself. Or maybe it was Maryam herself; perhaps she and the odd stories that hovered about her person were responsible for the dreams plaguing my imagination. I became a lover without any sequence of events to sustain me. […]
>
> Maryam was like a dot in history, unmarked by dates.[28]

For Ibrahim, Maryam is a symbol, like millions of other Palestinian women within the collective consciousness of the society; they are not equal human beings. In this way, through sex, Ibrahim acts out his perception of his nationalist values and aspirations. Nonetheless, Maryam's pregnancy is a big surprise. Ibrahim hides from her and later from her brothers, just arrived from Brazil seeking vengeance. While Ibrahim leaves Palestine to become a prosperous businessman, Maryam insists on staying in her country. She admits that 'one has to think of other people before thinking of himself', yet, she asks herself 'what should we do with these people ? People are still prisoners within prehistoric cave !They have nothing but stories and feeds on the mind of delusions and superstition'.[29] As seen by her family, her lover and the society, Maryam is a symbol of Palestine, an embodiment of honour and high culture or an obedient sister and wife. Yet, Khalifeh counters such an idealized image with the alternative image of Maryam as free and uncontrollable. According to Jacqui Alexander, female sexual autonomy in *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant* functions as a 'symbol of threat' to both traditional cultures and Western stereotypes, as 'it poses a challenge to the ideological anchor of an originary nuclear family, a source of legitimation for the state, which perpetuates the fiction that the family is the cornerstone of society'.[30]

Although she is a woman, Maryam does not feel weak or vulnerable. Rather, she defends her right to live and to bring up her son in his own country. Maryam, like Busayna, is an independent woman, whose economic agency empowers her national resistance to the systematic Israeli policy of dislocation and exile of Palestinians and strengthens her self-respect and self-confidence as a free human being, not as an inferior creature. Commenting on the characterization of Maryam, Edward Said says:

[24] Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, p. 210.
[25] Edward Said, *After the Last Sky* (London: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 80.
[26] Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation (*London, Thousand Oaks, 1997), p. 22.
[27] M. Badawi, 'Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers' *Wellesley Studies in Critical Theory, Literary History and Culture*, Volume 27 (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 249.
[28] Sahar Khalifeh, *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant* translated by Aida A. Bamia (New York: Interlink Books, 2007), p. 44.
[29] Sahar Khalifeh, *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant*, p. 89.
[30] M. Jacqui Alexander, 'Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Economy', *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures.* Edited by M Alexander; Chandra Talpade Mohanty (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 65.

> In this young woman's understanding, therefore, the opposite of conceding was supposed to be defiance, the act of defying, resisting and refusing to bend under the will of a power that one perceives as unjust and unreasonable.[31]

When the ailing 60-year-old Ibrahim returns to the occupied territories thirty years after his disappearance, searching for Maryam in hopes of easing his solitude and spiritual emptiness, he is flatly rejected by his son as a 'defeated stranger'.[32] Maryam too 'offers Ibrahim no solace'.[33] While Ibrahim abandons his own ideals and dreams of becoming a novelist, opting instead to seek wealth and commercial success abroad, Mariam reshapes her nationalist filiation and cultural affiliations, taking the lead in the Second Intifada. Familial integration between Maryam and her son Michael transcends individual female struggle against discrimination, as Said puts it, to stand for the amazing effort of Palestinian women whom he praises, noting 'their existence everywhere in Palestinian life [and] their unassimilated strength that provokes in our warily politicized, automatic manhood'.[34]

Both Zaki el Dessouki and Ibrahim stereotype women as either 'sexual objects' or as 'symbols of land', not as equal human being. They travel to civilized Western countries but remain locked with the shackles of their masculinist ideas. Consequently, both men consider their possession of women as an exercise of power and authority over land, establishing their masculinity as the only power to 'maintain their hold on Arab culture and women', a power that turns into a 'subjugating and enslaving obsession'.[35] Busayna and Mariam, on the other hand, develop a positive perception and awareness of their social responsibilities. They redefine their cultural affiliations to shun patriarchal and sexist ideas and norms of their society. Both women achieve different degrees of development and change and are worthy of sympathy and understanding. Being bound to a repressive and impoverished world, the majority of male characters in the two novels escape into illusion. Nonetheless, female characters work hard to deal with and destroy their own illusions and even the illusions of others.

Female Political Awareness and the Cause of Justice in Chicago and My First Love: Female Freedom and Political Action

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said celebrates 'narratives of enlightenment and emancipation' as they characterize 'the emergence of a new intellectual and political conscience'.[36] Such an emancipatory narrative is evident in the characterization of Shimaa Al-Mohamedy and Nidal al–Kahan in Al-Aswany's *Chicago* and Khalifeh's *My First Love,* respectively. Both characters are highly-educated Egyptian and Palestinian feminists who travel to the West to study for their PhDs. Both novels portray political change and transformations in the way women see themselves in modern Egypt and Palestine. Consequently, their translations into different languages mark 'resistance to exclusion and confinement'.[37] In this way, such translations reveal a reality that seems inaccessible to the Western Other. In this part, I focus on the emergence of political female agency in Al-Aswany's *Chicago* and Khalifeh's *My First Love* and their engagement with the cause of political reform in their countries.

Female Political Awareness and the Other in *Chicago*

Events in *Chicago* take place in Egypt and the United States after 9/11, and investigate the concept of cultural and political integration through tracing the relationships of Shimaa Al-Mohamedy with a group of Egyptian and Arab émigrés who live and work in Chicago. As a middle-class physician who lives in the small Egyptian town of Tanta, Shimaa is controlled and suffocated by patriarchal traditions and tribal norms that restrict women's movements and public appearance, particularly when they are, like Shimaa, over thirty and unmarried. Shimaa experiences 'huge psychological and social pressures'[38] as she lacks familial understanding, particularly from her mother, and finds difficulty in sharing her dreams and aims in life with other people. To escape her patriarchal society, Shimaa insists on disobeying her mother and defying her family who 'see it unacceptable for a girl to

[31] Said, 'Defiance, Dignity, and the Rule of Dogma', p. 13.
[32] Sahar Khalifeh, *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant*, p. 189.
[33] Sahar Khalifeh, *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant*, p. 210.
[34] Said, After the Last Sky: Palestinian lives, p. 77.
[35] Rema Hammami, 'Gender, Nakba and Nation: Palestinian Women's Presence and Absence in the Narration of 1948 memories,' *Homelands: Poetic Power and the Politics of Space*, editors. Ron Robin and Bo Strath (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 1-39, p. 29.
[36] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 68.
[37] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 29-30.
[38] Alaa Al-Aswany, *Chicago* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), p. 15.

travel abroad alone', and takes the scholarship to study at the University of Illinois in America.

Travelling to Chicago to study medicine, Shimaa realizes that not only has she idealized the West but also that her psychological bondage to her patriarchal culture hinders her enjoyment of her freedom. While Shimaa is oppressed by Professor James Backer, who is known for being anti-Muslims after 9/11,[39] she is supported by Professor John Graham, who replies to Professor Becker that the 9/11 disaster resulted from the fact that 'successive American administrations supported dictatorial regimes in the Middle East in order to get oil and to make profit selling weapons to armed extremists in these countries'.[40] Ironically enough, Shimaa discovers that duality and double standards characterize the lives of Egyptian emigrés as well, whose experiences serve as cautionary tales for pursuing the American dream. Professor Mohammed Salah and his Masters student, Naji Abdel Samd, openly oppose the corrupt political system in Egypt and call for change. Yet they are attacked by the American police and discriminated against for their political activity, while Dr. Raefet Thabit has repudiated his origins as an Egyptian and takes every opportunity to declare that Egyptians are afflicted with 'cowardice and hypocrisy, lying, evasiveness and laziness, and an inability to think methodically'.[41]

Depressed by both the corrupt political sphere in Egypt and the discriminatory politics in the US, Shimaa seeks refuge and salvation in love. However, though living in a new culture, Shimaa is stereotyped as a sexual object, not as a human being. She is harassed by drunken American men, while Egyptian researcher, Tarik Haseeb, like Zaki el Dessouki in *Yacoubian Building*, reduces love to sensual desire. For him, Shimaa's looks: her breasts, lips, cheeks, and body, come before her intellect. Tarik keeps chasing 'naïve and shy' Shimaa, promising her love till she 'submits to his sexual desires'.[42] According to Luce Irigaray, in phallocentric cultures, 'it is crucial that [women] keep [their] bodies even as [they] bring them out of silence and servitude'.[43] In such a culture, Shimaa's duty, like Busayna's, is to submit her body to Tariq. When Shimaa is pregnant, Tariq, like Ibrahim in *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant* disappears, to leave her alone to face the consequences of her 'disgraceful' act that brings 'shame and dishonor on all of her kin'.[44]

Nonetheless, the situation is not much better for Westernized Egyptian characters in the novel. Dr. Raefet abruptly sunders himself from the Western life he has so carefully crafted, his traditional sense of honour resurrected when his daughter runs off with her boyfriend. Like Shimaa's patriarchal family in Egypt, Westernized Egyptians, Dr. Raefet and Tariq, replace the power of the patriarchal Gods with the power of patriarchal cultures. Both powers, Said emphasizes, 'are shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the [political] authority'.[45] They take new American culture uncritically and in the end they are lost, never feeling that they really belong to one culture or the other. Rather, they create virtual identities for themselves.

Nevertheless, Shimaa, despite her sufferings and abuse, defies expectations as a subjugated, naïve woman; she resumes her studies after having an abortion. She decides to go home after she finishes her studies and to change her society for the better, declaring that 'we need to sacrifice to get freedom'.[46] Considering her personal experiences in Egypt and Chicago, Shimaa realizes that political freedom and personal freedom are inseparable and that both require confrontation and courage. Rather than escaping realities, like the majority of male characters in the novel, she admits her mistakes and is able to pursue a full life without constraints or fears. Sukhdev Sandhu argues that 'Al-Aswany's masterstroke in *Chicago* is to extract his characters from the comfort of their own cultures. In exile their personalities are stripped of all the legitimising props; their self-deceiving fantasies, prejudices and limitations are laid bare'.[47] Shimaa explores her sexual, emotional and intellectual possibilities to the maximum, concluding that 'the personal is the political'.[48]

Female Political Activism and Displacement in *My First Love*

If contemporary politics is the focus of *Chicago*, in

[39] Alaa Al-Aswany, *Chicago*, p. 78.
[40] Alaa Al-Aswany, *Chicago*, p. 78.
[41] Alaa Al-Aswany, *Chicago*, p. 42.
[42] Al-Aswany, *Chicago*, p.132.
[43] Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*. Translated by Gillian C. Gill.(New York: Columbia UP, 1987), p. 19.
[44] Gershen Kaufman, *The Psychology of Shame: Theory and Treatment of Shame-Based Syndromes* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2004), p. 280.
[45] *The World, the Text and the Critic*, p. 290.
[46] Al-Aswany, *Chicago*, p.160.
[47] Sukhdev Sandhu , 'Chicago by Alaa Al Aswany', *The Telegraph*, (September, 2008), p. 33.
[48] Sandra Gilbert, 'Who Do Feminist Critics Want? A Postcard from the Volcano', *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (London: Virago Press limited, 1986), p. 31.

Khalifeh's *My First Love*, 60-year-old Palestinian artist and painter Nidal al-Kahan retells the history of Palestine from 1948 to the present, tracing the struggles of three generations of Palestinian women against erasure and displacement. 'Hebrew translations of [texts such as *My First Love*]', Said argues, 'is a way of entering Israeli life culturally, making a positive effect on it, changing people's mind from bloody passion to reasonable understanding of Israel's Arab Others'.[49] As a child, Nidal sees her father abandoning the family to marry a Jewish woman and move to the Israeli side, while her mother and grandmother not only run the house, but help Palestinian fighters with food and weapons as well. Nidal remembers how 'as I started painting, I drew pictures from reality: my grandmother, mother, tree poppy, jasmine and pine trees and the rebels'.[50] As a child, Nidal understands the value of the land and the sacrifices of her family and people to defend it.

As a young woman, Nidal travels to Rome to study art. Like Shimaa, she is at first confused and feels lonely and isolated in exile. To escape her despair, Nidal moves from one place to another. She falls in love and gets married twice but finally devotes all her time and effort to paintings that commemorate the struggle of her people against discrimination and apartheid. Roaming the world with her paintings about the tragedy of her people, Nidal starts to re-establish links with her homeland. She feels 'incomplete', 'experiences racism' and 'is isolated from other people', but admits that 'there are people who sympathize with us'.[51] However, Nidal is angry with Palestinian politics as well. She disapproves of corruption, factions, and fights among Palestinians and the lack of a unified plan for liberation. Like Shimaa in *Chicago*, Nidal realizes that Arabs have to 'fight for democracy, freedom and equality themselves' and not to 'depend on others'.[52]

As an old woman, Nidal returns to her homeland. She commemorates the struggles of her mother and grandmother against Israeli occupation. The gradual transformation of Nidal from an artist to a historian and politician portrays the evolution and story of Palestine itself. Through the representation of Nidal, Khalifeh avoids the trap of assuming that Palestinian politics are homogeneous. Nidal's biting criticism of Israeli atrocity and her passionate commitments to her lost homeland reveal her agency in the world. Unlike her mother, Nidal is not cut off from the outside world. Rather, she uses her art to promote the Palestinian cause to the international community. For Said, realities on the ground require Palestinians not only to 'dog Israeli military might with their obdurate moral claim, their insistence that they would prefer not to leave, not to abandon Palestine forever, and with exposure of their atrocity or inhumanity', but also to be 'open to the Other', rather than sinking into the 'hostilities of our struggle'.[53] Khalifeh ends the novel with the birth of 'Nidal's grandson, Odiey' while Nidal 'visits the graves of her grandparents and relatives, people who died but still live in her heart and memory'.[54]

Beneath the strident political message, *Chicago* and *My First Love* are, above all, beautifully observed investigations of the development of women in Egypt and Palestine towards positions of authenticity and authority. In the two novels, women have freedom in movement, yet are still stereotyped as inferior. However, Nidal and Shimaa reshape their cultural affiliations as they explore different cultures and traditions. Their stories show that integration does not erase identity; rather, a person can be 'hybrid and authentic at the same time'.[55] Both novelists abandon generalizations and emphasize the individuality of their female characters, but also highlight the role of politics in controlling public consciousness and attitudes towards the other. Khalifeh's emphasis on the right of Palestinian people to the land of Palestine at a time when apartheid crimes and violations of human rights are committed every day marks the novel as an example of resistance literature, while Al-Aswany's breakdown of Egyptian women's gender and political siege is a positive idea in the age of the rise of Islamism and conservative ideas. Moreover, Shimaa's and Nidal's experiences in the West challenge political truisms at a time when the Arab world is accused of despotism and the United States and Europe are viewed as the land of freedom and human rights.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I highlighted the cultural benefits of translations of Arabic literature into different languages worldwide. In the four translated novels discussed, Al-Aswany and Khalifeh investigated economic and political life in contemporary Egypt and Palestine, through engaging with cultural notions about female sexuality and emancipation within the historical struggle of the two

[49] Edward Said, 'Defiance, Dignity, and the Rule of Dogma', p. 13.
[50] Sahar Khalifeh, *My First Love* (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 2010), p 3.
[51] Khalifeh, *My First Love*, p. 177.
[52] Khalifeh, *My First Love*, p. 199.
[53] Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian lives*, p. 49.
[54] Khalifeh, *My First Love*, p. 390.
[55] Edward Said, 'A desolation, and they Called it Peace', *Al-AhramWeeklyOn-line*, Issue No.383 (June 1998), p. 13

countries against oppression and colonialism. By producing such works, both represent works of resistant integration since they neither reject the Other nor idealize nationalist traditions. Rather, Al-Aswany and Khalifeh speak truth to power; both expose native corruption and patriarchy and colonial discrimination. They reconcile their aspirations for justice and freedom with the harsh realities on the ground and both uphold the right of the oppressed to resist injustice by all means. In their novels, although the desired transformations in socio-political situations are far from real, female characters courageously went through journeys of suffering, resistance and success on the personal and national levels. In part 2 of the paper, I traced how female characters in Al-Aswany's *Yacoubian Building* and Khalifeh's *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant* utilized interdependent economic environments in Egypt and Palestine, respectively, to promote politics of individual authority and equality. Women in these two novels consciously engage with the decision-making policies of their families and their countries. For women like Busayna el Sayed in *Yacoubian Building* and Maryam al-Katan in *The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant*, economic independence not only enables them to sustain a solid national resistance to oppression and colonial discrimination, but also to take leadership in challenging patriarchal and sexist cultural traditions inside their native cultures

In part 3, I analysed examples of female political activism in Al-Aswany's *Chicago* and Khalifeh's *My First Love.* While Shimaa Al-Mohamedy in *Chicago* take the initiative to re-define her psychological bondage to the inherited, discriminatory sexist orders of the Egyptian society, Nidal al-Kahan in *MY First Love* uses her artistic talent to endorse political activism for the liberation of Palestine. Women in these two novels work hard to liberate their minds and bodies from the shackles of gender, racial and cultural binary opposition of male/female, white/black, and superior/inferior. They are positive figures whose personal triumph against the powers of abuse, oppression and loss, being inseparable from both the national struggle of their countries for recognition and justice, and the human struggle against the powers of racism and discrimination is clearly shown. It may take long and a lot of sacrifices and at the end its worth. In this way, Al-Aswany's and Khalifeh's translated novels represent new images and traditions resistant to colonial and sexist stereotypes about Oriental women as inferior sexual objects. Struggles of Arab women for freedom are up to nowadays women's struggles worldwide.

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