

Translation Theory and Praxis in East and West: The Case of Saud Al-Sanousi's *Saaq al-Bamboo*

IBRAHIM BADSHAH

Abstract: Saud Al-Sanousi emplots his novel, *Saaq al-Bamboo* with instances that convey the plight of migrants with the process of translation becoming the trope via which it is elucidated; in an interesting synergy of the two. The novel is originally written in Arabic, but disguises itself as an Arabic translation of an autobiography written by the protagonist, in Tagalog/Filipino language. The author uses a fictional translator, language of translation, and large number of footnotes along with a translator's note in the beginning, as a stylistic technique to further his argument. The paper will try to closely analyze the unique narrative technique the author has adopted and its relation to the theme he engages with, i.e. migration, in an attempt to assimilate both the processes and look for theories that can be applied on both. The paper also intends to explore the politics of translation in East-West context emphasizing elements like choice of the text and changes in translation with regard to cultural hegemony of the West, based on a close scrutiny of the English translation of the said novel that omits the stylistic novelty of the text. It will also look into the freedom of the translator, juxtaposing the traditional notion of the original/translation binary and the new notions in translation theory that offer a claim of originality to the translated text. Moreover, based on a close examination of the Malayalam translation of the novel, it will undertake a thorough study of the practice of translation among Eastern languages as well paying attention to the concept of 'untranslatability' as well as the politics underlying translation practices. The study will question the universality of inherently Eurocentric translation theories and thus conclude by highlighting the need for a theory that deals with translation practices within the East as well.

Keywords: Politics, translation, orient, untranslatability

In translation: The stylistic novelty of *Saaq al-Bamboo* and its implications for the text's thematic concerns

Kuwaiti novelist Saud Al-Sanousi's seminal work *Saaq al-Bamboo* (The Bamboo Stalk) won him The International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) also known as the Arabic Booker in 2013. The novel unfolds the life of José Mendoza, the offspring of a secret affair between a Filipina housemaid working in Kuwait and the only son of the house. Although the mother and child are sent back to the Philippines immediately after he is born, the boy returns to Kuwait as an adult as per the will of his father who has died by then. The novel deals with the complexities of a postcolonial world characterized by the presence of hybrid identities, as the protagonist finds himself in the problematic position as an Arab for the Filipinos and Filipino for the Arabs. In telling the tale of José, Al-Sanousi is also touches upon issues plaguing the postcolonial, globalized world, such as the Bidoon Crisis as well as the crises related to the creation of hybrid identities.

The novel confuses the readers with its innovative stylistics construed with its thematics, effectively fusing form and content. It is only at the end that the readers get to know

the full implications of the title page which attributes the authorship of the work to its protagonist. The title of the book appears in Tagalog as well as in Arabic, mentioning Ibrahim Salam as the translator and Khawla Rashid as the Editor. (Image 1). The readers are yet to emerge from the confusion they are thrown into when the next page opens to a translator's bio where Ibrahim Salam's life and works are detailed. The next two pages further this confusion as they explain the translator's method and opinion under the title 'Translator's note'. All of this ends with a dedication, where the names mentioned here appear later as the novel progresses. The novel is divided into six parts and all of them except the last one begin with a quote by José Rizal, a Filipino reformer. In addition, the novel has 38 footnotes, which are, as it has been stated in the translator's note, "given either by the author himself or the translator or the editor" (Al-Sanousi 11, my trans.). And in the end, the translator, Ibrahim Salam's address and contact number are given in a separate page, with no additional information about Al-Sanousi anywhere in the book other than his name appearing on the cover.

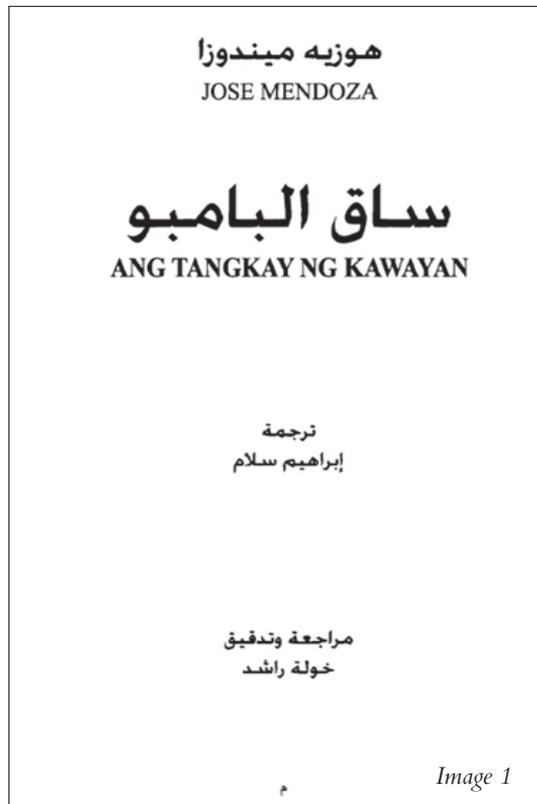


Image 1

At this juncture, all evidences point to the work being a translation indeed. However as the novel proceeds, we realize that the translator, the editor along with the people to whom the novel is dedicated, are all fictional characters who later appear in the novel. The translator's bio, his note and all the footnotes that appear in the book are the Al-Sanousi's craftsmanship that make it look like a translation of the autobiographical account of someone who underwent plenty of trauma because of the attitude of the Kuwaiti society. Even the quotes by José Rizal, the Filipino reformer, which appear at the beginning of each part of the novel create the impression that the book is penned by a Filipino author. Nadia Abdulwahab Khawandanah, in her "The Exile Homeland: Splintered Identity in Saud Al-Sanousi's *The Bamboo Stalk*" comments on this unique

style of Al-Sanousi saying that “the writer’s inspired, pragmatic narrative technique... enriched realism profoundly in the novel and simultaneously, signified a sparkling originality in the narration” (Khawandanah 2). For Ali Al-Majnooni, this novel is “a text that performs translation. Its theme, topography, and narrative technique are spun around translation” (Al-Majnooni). That is to say that the author indulges in a creative reconstruction of a multi-layered translation in *Saaq al-Bamboo*.

The effort demanded by such a realistic portrayal of the process of translation can be gauged by the fact that in order to render such an innovation successful, the author has to do an internal translation in writing each sentence, i.e. to translate the idea into a foreign language and translate it back into Arabic. Even more commendable is perhaps the writing style of the novelist enriched with the Modern Standard Arabic or *fusha*, free from the influences of the regional dialects. At the same time, there is a visible influence of a foreign language which can be seen in the untranslated words and expressions including the one in the very title of the book. They leave finest brushstrokes of translation and enhances the realism in the novel. Realism has been indispensable to Arabic literature till now, and the literary quality of the text is measured by its portrayal of real-life events, making it important for Sanousi to bring it to the fore in his novel as well. Such a viewpoint is supported by Hani Elayyan who, quoting Sabry Hafez talks about “the lengthy preambles that the pioneers of Arabic fiction wrote to convince the readers the authenticity of the tales they told” (Elayyan 88). Quoting from the translator’s note in *Saaq al-Bamboo* Elayyan says, “This preface is part of the novel’s attempt to create complete make-belief” (Elayyan 89).

The narrative technique serves more purposes than one. It is perhaps to be noted that several migrant labourers in the Gulf countries are denied their basic human rights. In the novel, the protagonist’s rights are violated because of the attitude of the civil society towards its migrants. Making the protagonist tell his own traumatic tale lends credence and authenticity to a crafted story. Moreover, Al-Sanousi, in a way, executes poetic justice by letting the protagonist tell his story without the interference of a narrator. Khawandanah’s statement is relevant here:

It is more than merely a novelty in Arabic literature; it is a very brave step to give the floor to a foreign voice to speak up his concerns. In short, to hear the Other, in his own words and ways of expression to relate his dilemma. The natives have had enough interference in the hero’s life. It is time now to give him the chance to tell his version of his story (Khawandanah 3,4).

Another point here is about the text carrying a performative aspect of translation. This internal translation that happens in multiple layers is analogous to José’s migration to Kuwait and going back to the Philippines, denoting the perpetual dislocatedness of narrative and the individual. This underlines the inherent relation between migration and translation. As Paul F. Bandia states, “Translation and the postcolonial migrant condition frequently share displacement or relocation as a defining attribute. In a metaphorical sense, translation can be described as a sort of wandering or nomadic existence of a text in perpetual exile.” (Bandia 274) Hence, the author is attempting to portray the complexities of migration through the metaphor of translation. Al-Sanousi also underlines the untranslatability between languages by this unique narrative technique. The book’s title itself is an example of the same.

The author’s attempt at adding a foreign word, bamboo, in the title whereas there is actually an equivalent word in Arabic, khyzuran, which does make its appearance also in the novel, points to his intention of bringing to the fore the untranslatability of certain words and contexts, especially in the case of Kuwait and the Middle East in general. By doing this, Al-Sanousi is saying that the bamboo he is talking about is not

one from Kuwait, nor from anywhere in Arabia, but from a foreign country, which makes it difficult for it to grow in this language/culture/soil. This also reaffirms the parallels between migration and translation. José's moving from one culture to another is seen as being analogous to the process of translation of a text from one language to another. Applying the theory of translation on the politics of migration and cultural assimilation, the title can also denote the protagonist's inability to assimilate into Kuwaiti culture. This is similar to what Guillermo Gómez-Peña's model of menudo chowder that Homi K Bhabha quotes, which affirms that the migrants cannot entirely be a part of the receptive culture, since there will always be 'stubborn chunks' that only float on the surface (Bhabha 218).

(In)Appropriation: The English translation of *Saaq al-Bamboo*

In 2015, renowned translator Jonathan Wright translated *Saaq al-Bamboo* into English as *The Bamboo Stalk*. The West's interest in the book however should be held suspect primarily because as Donya Tag-El-Din states "the West often consumes the East, not only in economic terms, but also consumes Eastern stories and creates literary discourses about the East, in order to perpetuate the myth of Eastern inferiority" (Tag-El-Din 22). *Saaq al-Bamboo* is a book that talks about the interaction between two cultural, racial and religious entities and the outcome of the said interaction in multiple layers. This, in a way, affirms the West's perception of the East as culturally intolerant, religiously extremist, racially arrogant and regionally proud. Narration of oppression and inequality in Arab society is a popular topic for western readers. And this book, for its portrayal of the inhuman treatment of the migrant laborers, for showing the microcosm of Arab society through the Al-Tarouf household and for its showcasing of the controversies such as the Bidoon crisis, became appealing to the Western readership. One evidence for this claim lies in the blurb given in the English translation. The blurb at the back of the Arabic text presents an excerpt from the novel where the protagonist expresses his hope of becoming a bamboo which can grow under any circumstances, explaining the title while also providing for a realistic portrayal of the crisis faced by him. But the English translation's blurb summarizes José's mother's plight and goes on to talk about José himself. Dedicating three lines to say that "He is ill-prepared to plunge headfirst into a world where the fear of tyrants and dictators is nothing compared to the fear of 'what will people say?'" indicating the publisher's intention in turning the readers' focus to the value(less) system of the East where the society cannot thrive on its conscience alone. The concluding sentence says "*The Bamboo Stalk* takes an unflinching look at the lives of foreign workers in Arab countries and confronts the universal problems of identity, race and religion" making it seem like at the heart of the problem are foreign workers. This proves to be a false judgement, as we see other migrant laborers working in a better environment. The fictional translator Ibrahim Salam, who is also a Filipino living in Kuwait, is one good example. When José meets him for the first time he says: "Kuwait is wonderful... The people here are kind" to which José wanted to respond with "That's because you are not a Kuwaiti who looks like a Filipino." (Al-Sanousi 322)

Moreover, the crises of characters such as Merla and Ghazzan, who never engage in migration, are also highlighted to a great extent in the novel. Hence, it is clear that the crisis in the novel is not that of migrants, instead it is that of the ones who live with a fragmented identity. And by juxtaposing two characters, José and Merla, who undergo similar crises, where one is a migrant and the other a native, Al-Sanousi is, in a way trying to say that the problem is not that of migration and it doesn't matter if you are in your own country or outside, if you don't belong to a single race, religion or national identity, your fate will seal this crisis.

Apart from being blunt in the blurb, about the intention behind taking the novel for publication, the nature of the original book is technically changed in translation by omitting several paratextual elements which are central to the novel. To begin with, Wright omits the additional title page, relevance of which is already discussed in the paper. The translator's bio as well as the note have been omitted too, both of which are central to the understanding of the novel as a whole. Al-Sanousi adds the translator's note in order to explain the fictional translator's attitude towards the book, which can also be read as the author's emphasis on the fact that the following incidents are not his creation but that he is a mere chronicler. The method of translation that the note talks about charts the Al-Sanousi's idea of an ideal translation and translator. "Even though my real personality occupies a space in it, my duty in the production of this work is limited to transforming the words in the source text from Filipino Language to Arabic as per the request made by the author" (Al-Sanousi 11 my trans.).

Later, the note elaborately talks about untranslatability as well.

Every language has its own special features. And each language is rooted in its own specific cultural milieu. Even though the cultures resemble one another, each one of them is distinct from the other for its unique features. Therefore, I came across a lot of Filipino words which do not have equivalences in Arabic; especially those that are specific to the particular region and society and cannot be seen in any other culture. Despite my proficiency in and love for Arabic, the language of the Holy Qur'an, I faced hardship in translating such words, making me translate a lot of phrases to something that stays closer to their literal meaning. Meanings of some terms can be understood from the context in which they appear. Others are explained in footnotes. Their abundance might surprise you. But the truth is that both the author and I were compelled to depend on them (Al-Sanousi 11, my trans.).

The last three sentences, denoting the importance of footnotes to the novel, require special attention. Translator's note ends with this note: "NB: All the footnotes that appear in this text which are not specifically mentioned as the translator's or the author's, belong to Miss Khawla Rashid who edited and revised this work" (Al-Sanousi 12, my trans.).

These two instances clearly underline the importance of the footnotes in the novel. This adds to the metanarrative style and enriches realism. Al-Majnooni opines that the footnotes impart crucial bits of information that provides context to the readers and also serve as reminders of the work being a "(fictional) translation". However, the translator deliberately omits these footnotes by incorporating them into the body of the text itself, stripping it of its stylistic complexity and nuance.

Surprisingly, the dedication page is not omitted in the English translation which might confuse the readers provided it is noticed. As already mentioned, the book is dedicated to five Kuwaiti youngsters, encountered by the protagonist first during their visit Philippines and later befriended during his stay in Kuwait. For anyone who reads the English translation and notices the similarity between the names in the dedication page and the names of the characters, this will remain a mystery; as the readers won't be able to find the reason behind these similarities anywhere in the English translation. In doing away with the narrative technique employed by the author his craftsmanship largely remains unacknowledged in this translation. Commentators of the English translation called it a novel in first person narrative where the protagonist recounts his trauma of being born to parents from two different countries, cultures and religions. However, all the commentators of the Arabic text talked extensively about the technique Al-Sanousi employed and its relation to the theme of the novel.

The ending of the novel however is more dramatic. The protagonist is watching a football game between Kuwait and Philippines live on TV. He can't take sides; thus he stops writing when both the teams are on a tie. The English translation ends there. But in the original text, the protagonist/author adds a final line as footnote.

“The game ended in favor of the Kuwaiti national team with a second goal scored by Waleed Ali at the 84th minute” (Al-Sanousi 396, my trans.). This implies the narrator’s loyalty towards Kuwait. Even though José claims to be neutral regarding his loyalty, the author leaves hints to point it out. This is evident in his comment when Filipino team scores their first goal and feels that he scored an own goal. José leaves the hall feeling relieved when the Kuwaiti team scores their first goal. The omission of this detail in the English translation results in a change of the idea it represents.

Poor (?) Saud: On translating the Orient

What is it that makes the translator modify the text to such an extent? Does the west think that innovations from the East are either not presentable enough or not acceptable? Or, does the western translator/editor/publisher find it irrelevant to include the finest details the author is trying to include in the book, because the reason why he is doing so has more to do with the ‘toxic realism’ in Arabic Literary tradition, where they tend to blur boundaries between real and imagined, factual and fictional making genres overlap as mutually enabling categories?

Fahndrich’s observations about west-oriented translation is important here. The readership of European languages, especially English, is much more than that of other languages. This makes it easier for the critics and readers to compare and comment on the translation of works originally written in English. But when it comes to translation from other languages, such as Arabic, to English, the readers are compelled to put their trust on the translators (Fahndrich 96). This also grants them absolute freedom in translation. And this freedom along with the ideas of western supremacy, hegemony of the west and ‘inefficient orient’ make it a fatal combination.

RHK Khalid Al-Omary says: “[T]here appears to be unanimous agreement that Oriental literature in translation in general is subordinated in the West... In their generality translated source texts are underestimated and even subjugated” (Al-Omary 283). And this should be read in relation with the hegemony of the west. Edward Said points out while talking about the ‘representations’, that the Orientalism undertakes through the depiction of the Orient:

The things to look at [in these representations] are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, not the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original. The exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and *faute de mieux*, for the poor Orient (Said 21).

While Said here talks about the texts that depict the Orient, this can be applied on translations too, beginning from the choice of texts, method of translation and the freedom the translator takes to “correct” the original. Samah Selim, while talking about Arab modernity, voices a similar concern, quoting from Tejaswini Niranjana’s *Siting Translation*, that “translation is theorized as ‘a technology of domination’ imposed to ‘discipline and regulate’ the subaltern” (Selim 15). Mahasweta Sengupta in her essay “Translation as Manipulation” talks about how the texts were rewritten by the dominant powers, denuding “them of their complexity and variety” and presenting them as “specimens of a culture that is ‘simple’, ‘natural’...” (Sengupta 160). For the translators of Arabic texts, Orient is, borrowing Al-Omary’s words, “something that is difficult, obscure, mysterious and even inferior, [which is implied] in the way western translators deal with the cultural, literary and linguistic input the literary texts have” (Al-Omary 283-284) Said’s recounting of the response he got from New York publisher calling Arabic “a controversial language” underlines the same idea (Said, 2001). And

the perception of the West about Orient works its way into translations as well. As Al-Omary puts it, had there been a better image, these translators would have dealt with these texts with more respect (Al-Omary 284) in complete contravention to what happens in the English translation of *Saaq al-Bamboo*, making the adjective Said used to depict the Orient perfectly fit the author, poor Saud Al-Sanousi.

Al-Toma's commentary on Wickens's opinion that most of the Arabic literature is "little but a servile imitation of the worst features of our modern literature" is very important when we look into the 'modification' that Wright has made in his translation of *Saaq al-Bamboo*. For him, this comment is an outcome of his familiarity (or unfamiliarity) with Arabic literature only through translations (Al-Toma 164). Another side of the politics of translation; the politics of censorship works here. Al-Omary observes, "Arab writers who promoted the West and its cultural values in their writings are placed in the front... [T]hey were encouraged by western prizes for the same reason at large. Till this date, the first decade of the third millennium, the Arab Orient is placed literarily and culturally under the same politics of perception and representation" (Al-Omary 288).

This is how the narrative of Arabic being the imitation is developed. West maintains their standards in choosing the text that needs to be translated. Then, the Orient centric elements in these chosen texts are omitted and standardized in translation as per the literary practices in the West, as it is evident from the case of *Saaq al-Bamboo*. After undergoing these multi layered process, there will be very little that differentiates these literatures from that of the west. Hence, this leads to the conclusion of them being an imitation.

The intention behind erasing these stylistic elements in translation was perhaps to make it easier for the target readers to read and comprehend. Even though, many translation theorists approve of this assimilation and homogenization, in the East-West context, it should be held suspect because of the percolation of power dynamics into the practice and the inclusion of 'oriental' stereotypes it entails. Numerous theories assert the translators' moral responsibility towards the readers of the translated text. Susan Bassnett argues that the translator cannot be the author of the source language text, hence, determining the original intention of the author is impossible. And the moral responsibility vested on the translator is limited to the target readers (Bassnett 23). While the translator does have a moral responsibility towards their readers in that they should make the text comprehensible and enjoyable to them, it should not happen through absolute assimilation. Translation as a practice is steeped in an acknowledgement of diversity and a respect/reverence for it, and it paves way for an interaction of the differences in a way that is mutually enabling to the participating elements. This mutual enabling can only happen when the individual elements retain their crux even while morphing into something different, without having to sacrifice themselves in the name of assimilation (Ribeiro). Such a feeling of mutual reverence is what fosters processes such as globalization, cosmopolitanism and the multiculturalism. The world, even as a 'single entity' is not a homogenized one, as Arjun Appadurai puts it. Instead, it is "a complex, overlapping, disjunctive" cultural economy the new world is creating (Appadurai 217) making the translators' moral responsibility the production of texts that retain traces of the original by sticking to the ethics of understanding differences.

Origin(al) Tales: Translation theories and the claim of originality

Here, it is imperative to note Karen Emmerich's views on the 'original', which gives an entirely different color to the concept. The relevance of her conceptualization is pertinent in the context of the views she expresses combined with the hegemony of the west which is potentially harmful to the literary tradition of the Orient. The central idea of her *Literary Translation and the Making of Originals* (2017) is to invert

idea of the original by claiming ‘originality’ of the translation and proving the absence of a stable original. The foundation of the argument rests on the possible differences between the translations of the same texts done by different people. This is followed by a statement that says “[t]he entire translation is a text that didn’t exist before: all the words are added; all the words are different. A translation adds a new iteration, in a different language, to the sum total of texts for a work” (Emmerich 1-3). These two premises assert the originality of the translated works, without taking the ideas underlying the text itself into consideration. Even if seventy different translators give seventy different outputs, the meaning underlying all of them will be more or less the same. And the ones that present an entirely different meaning should be labelled as ‘mistranslation’ or ‘failed translation’, a term Emmerich finds baseless. Even if the translated text had not existed before, the content of the text, which is unique and unprecedented is always already there. For Emmerich, translation is an iteration of an unstable, indeterminate text. And in order to support this argument she talks about the texts with multiple versions. The *Thousand and One nights*, Franz Kafka’s texts and even Virginia Woolf’s novels are highlighted as examples for source texts having multiple unstable versions. But in such times of advancement, in publishing industry, where every text has single authentic versions, this point doesn’t seem valid. Even if we consider there are multiple versions, the one published by the publisher who holds the copyright can be taken as the authorized one. Emmerich rejects this possibility by bringing the example of her experience in translation and generalizing it (Emmerich 5). Proving the instability of the source text in a way proves the inefficiency of the source text to be the original. This directly approves all (mis)translations to be original. Another aspect is that of the West realigning the Orient or addressing its fissures. This gives absolute freedom in the hands of the translator to add to, subtract from and change what is there in the source text.

By dismantling the concept of the supremacy of original, Emmerich critiques the concepts of faithfulness and equivalence. Contractual terms that demand ‘faithful’ translation are criticized too. However, given the freedom the translator will possibly take, such contractual terms and the verification of their execution are necessary in the field of translation. Emmerich’s blind dismissal of the concept of faithfulness can be countered with Matthew Arnold’s words that Andre Lefevere quotes “the translator’s ‘first duty is to be faithful’” even though he expresses confusion in defining this faithfulness (Lefevere 59). Faithfulness does not mean that every word in the source text should be translated into the target language in exactly the same way. Instead, the translated text should aim to retain the nucleus of the source text.

Lefevere’s *Translation/History/Culture* engages with some important texts that talk about translation– a collection of prefaces the translators wrote to their translations. Nicolas Perrot d’Ablancourt, whose translations were first to be commented as ‘beautiful but unfaithful’ admits the infidelity he indulges in during translation and justifies it by saying “...I am the less to blame in that I have left out what was too filthy and softened what was too free...”. Stating a long list of elements that he thinks outdated or were irrelevant to his target audience, he says: “I had to change all of this accordingly if I wanted to produce something that is pleasing” (qtd. in Lefevere 36). Another controversial comparison he makes at the risk of sounding irrational goes as follows.

When you look at a beautiful face you will always discover some feature in it which you wish were not there. Similarly, the best authors contain passages that need to be touched up or clarified, certainly when I do not always stick to the author’s words, or even to his thoughts (qtd. in Lefevere 36).

This very problematic statement discounts the subjectivity of ‘beauty’, since something you find beautiful can be otherwise for someone else. Also, his not sticking to the author’s

thoughts, renders the readers incapable of distinguishing between the author's and the translator's thoughts and ideas. By saying that he "considered what ought to be said... rather than what he actually said" (qtd. in Lefevere 37) he also runs the risk of attributing ideas to the wrong person. To state it clearly, when a translator includes his ideas and replaces what the author says with his own, he is attributing the ideas to the author and claiming their authenticity through the reputation of the author. And by saying that he has done this, he is making it more complicated to the readers, who are then placed between a heap of ideas, both the author's and translator's, unable to distinguish between them.

Even though, Ablancourt admits that what he produced was not a translation, his method along with that of similar translators, who take the freedom to create adaptations of works rather than their translations, was adopted by a host of critics for formulation of variegated theoretical foundations. It is based on similar readings that Andre Lefevere radically reformulated translation as rewriting. But as Samah Selim says "Lefevere's definition of translation blurred the boundaries between translation and adaptation (where does the one end and the other begin?)" (Selim 17). This encapsulates the problems of Ablancourt's translation as well as other similar translations where faithfulness is not maintained.

When Orient translates the Orient

My translation of *Saaq al-Bamboo* to Malayalam was completed in 2016. And I want to take it as an example for the Orient translating Orient in the context of the politics of translation. Judging by its characteristics, this can be categorized as an activist translation that Samah Selim talks about in detail, referring to Richard Jacquemond, who presents it as a practice that stands in opposition to the institutionalized translation (Selim 180). In such a translation, the translator overrides the norms – that include its marketability – to represent the text with an intention to bring out the meaning more clearly. Being faithful to the text implies a passion to convey the meanings as accurately as possible while striving to preserve the effect created by the original. Such a process involves harboring a love and respect for both the author as well as the text, such that the translator is open to it and surrenders himself to it. As Spivak says, "Unless the translator has earned the right to become the intimate reader, she cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text" (Spivak 183). This act of intimate reading is the first step towards establishing a connection with the text prior to translation. And when the Orient translates the Orient, such a process is easily facilitated due to centuries of mutual interactions.

Malayalam and Arabic has a history of exchanges, that dates back to the pre-Islamic era. With the advent of Islam, it grew stronger, necessitating the birth of a new language; the Mappila language also known as Arabi-Malayalam. The Gulf Boom or the Gulf migration of Keralites following the discovery of oil, is similar to the *Nahda* in Egypt in terms of bringing modernity, except that the delegation sent from Egypt to Europe was in search of wisdom, whereas the Gulf delegation from India was looking for financial gains and the prosperity later brought renaissance in the Indian state of Kerala making it the only state in India with 100% literacy rate. On the other hand, as "the Orient is an integral part of the European material civilization and culture", (Said 2) India and other third world countries in Asia are integral part of the Gulf civilization. Hence, the Gulf for Indians, or Keralites is what Europe is for the Arabs in the ladder of cultural hierarchy and vice versa. And the same makes it easier for a translator to surrender to the text as Spivak suggests.

Translation has never been a mere linguistic act of transferring meaning from one culture to another. It is a very political act, beginning with the translator's choice of texts to the actual process of translation. This rings true for translation of Arabic texts

to Malayalam as well, which cannot be seen as mere instances of cultural exchange. Underlying it is deep-rooted politics. Mubashir P, in a paper titled “Tarjamat-ar-riwayat war-riwayaat al-mutarjamamin al-lughat al-Arabiyyaila al-lughat al-malybariya” (Translating novels and Malayalam translations of Arabic novels) enlists 23 novels translated from Arabic to Malayalam. These are majorly novels from Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt etc. all of which either depict the crises in the territory or the subversion of the image of Arabs represented by the wealthiest Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar etc. The choice of texts is important because the translators’ attempt is to deconstruct the popular notion existing among Muslims unfamiliar with Arabic, that the Arabic language is a sacred language and the sum total of Arabic literature is constituted by the religious texts. Until the translation of Sayyidaat al-Qamar by Jokha Al-Harhi got Man Booker International, a wide majority was unaware of the fact that such women writers and female representations exist in Arabic literature. Hence, the translations of Arabic novels that appeared in Malayalam can be seen as an attempt to modify the ready association of Arabic language and literature with Islamic culture and literature. And this understanding is relevant in India, where Arabic is taught in more than 20,000 madrasas (Khan 73) and 25 universities including 11 central universities, the non-Muslims learning Arabic constitute less than 0.1% of the total population. That is to say, if you take 1000 students learning Arabic in India, the chances are very less that you will find one non-Muslim among them. Hence, the translators are in a way trying to show the rich literary tradition to the people of their countries.

The relevance of exhibiting this rich tradition owes its origin to the rampant Islamophobia which misconstrues both the religion as well as its followers. Within such a context, the Arab world still remains as a conservative, closed community that oppresses women and religious minorities and unapologetically violates human rights. Every attempt to translate Arabic literature into Indian languages, especially to Malayalam, is therefore, an attempt at a redefinition of what constitutes the thematic bulk of Arabic Literature. . Since it is a political activity, that serves a purpose higher than mere transmission of meaning from one language to another, this can be called as an activist translation. These works underline that feminism/s, communism, revolutionary ideas and progressive thoughts exist in Arab World too. The translators find it their duty to translate them, primarily because of their religious affiliation, which links them with the Arab world given the history of the religion. Secondly, because of their commitment towards the Arab world, which has been crucial to their financial growth and development. It is true that the expatriates who live/d in Arab countries express a kind of dual nationalism, one towards the country they trace their roots to, and the other that fed them and their family. These commitments enable them to translate the texts without appropriations and modifications. This is evident in Malayalam translation of *Saaq al-Bamboo*. Though the structure of the Arabic text is confusing, it is maintained in the Malayalam translation by including the fictional translator’s note, his bio and footnotes as they appear in the original.

In terms of the faithfulness, there are contractual terms which the translator is supposed to strictly follow, failing which there is bound to be a legal action against him/her. The contracts include terms like “No additions, deletions, abridgements or alterations in the text, photographs or titles may be made without the prior written approval of the Author.” But there are things these terms can’t clearly cover. And translator has the duty of making the text enjoyable for the target readers. Andre Lefevere, in the introduction of his *Translation/ History/ Culture*, talks extensively about this conflict.

Rather than leaving “the reader in peace as much as possible,” and “moving the author towards him,” thus naturalizing what is foreign, the translator should in Schleiermacher’s

opinion leave “the author in peace, as much as possible,” and “move the reader towards him.” A translation should therefore sound “foreign” enough to its reader... (Lefevere 5)

Quoting Goethe, he refers to these kinds of translations as Critical translations, which are produced only to be read side by side with the original. This is one extreme end of translation in terms of faithfulness, which Lefevere says has ceased to exist (Lefevere 5). Lawrence Venuti observes that by foreignizing, the ethnocentric violence in translation practices can be restrained in comparison to the domestication, where the ethnocentric values are largely reduced (Venuti 29). The other extreme is the one which has been discussed earlier, proposed and carried out by Ablancourt and the likes. However, what is desirable in a translation is a moderate approach in which the translators stick to the ideas the original puts forward and renders them in a language that matches the beauty of the original. Where the author uses sophisticated language with embellishments, the translator has to use the same language and create a similar effect. That is the only way to fulfil the translator’s duty towards the author as well as the target readers. Lefevere uses this metaphor “a sculptor imitating the work of a painter” to explain this point as well as to establish the creativity of the translator (Lefevere 12). Elliott Colla refers to Silverstein’s term ‘transduction’, which is a process of conversion where it is compared to converting energy of wind or water to Electricity (Colla 316).

Though the Orient shares a relatively similar culture, Arabic is still notoriously untranslatable for many Eastern languages. Starting from the letters, 12 letters in Arabic alphabet don’t have equivalent sound representation in Malayalam, which makes it difficult to transcribe names of the characters and places. Even the letters, which have similar representation in English such as q and z, do not have a counterpart in Malayalam. And in a name like *عزيرة* (*A’zeeza*) which appears in the novel, Malayalam can only write it as അസീസ (*Aseesa*) in which even one sound cannot get an accurate representation.

In a multicultural society like Kerala, words such as mom, dad, grandfather, grandmother, aunt etc. have numerous equivalents in use. But they differ from one religious community to another. For example, among Hindu community, the word for dad is acchan, among Muslims, uppa, vappa, uppachi and vappachi and among Christians appan and appachan. And they can never be used interchangeably. This goes for all terms that denote relationships and there are no ‘standardized’ words which can be used indiscriminately. This being said, let us come to the case of *Saaq al-Bamboo*, where we see a mix of religious identities and a complex structure of familial relationships. The protagonist’s maternal relatives are Christians and paternal relatives are Muslims. This is never a problem in English, not even in Arabic. Now, overcoming this complexity requires training a close eye at the narrator. José has been living in a Christian environment for eighteen years. Even after coming to Kuwait, he does not get many chances for cultural interactions, which leaves no possibility for him to acquire ‘Muslim’ vocabulary. Hence, throughout the novel, he is supposed to stick to the vocabulary he obtained from his life in Philippines. Based on this, in Malayalam translation, the terms are translated in a Christian context using the words like ammachi(mom), appachan (dad), ammaama (grandma), appappan (grandpa)etc. This however only solves the problems encountered in the narration. However, in places where others are speaking, the terminology is based on their religious belongingness. One example will be José’s interactions with his step sister Khawla. The terminology in her conversations is translated in a Muslim way using words such as uppa (dad), vallyumma (grandma) etc.

Translation practices in the East

In *Saaq al-Bamboo*, we come across the fictional translator, Ibrahim Salam. He is a Filipino, whose mother tongue is Tagalog, and who learned Arabic as a foreign

language. This is a common practice in translations between minor and major languages, oft encountered in third world countries, where this hierarchy is more evident than anywhere else. By employing such a translator, Al-Sanousi is also hinting at translation practices within the East. Hence, the ‘Translator’s note’ that talks about how the translator is a mere vehicle to carry the meaning from source language/culture to the target language/culture denotes the attitude of the Orient who is translating the Orient.

Malayalam is not different in this case. Despite centuries of cultural and linguistic interactions, there is not a single text translated from Malayalam to Arabic by an Arab. Arabs already had a cultural capital for being the center of the Islamic tradition. With the discovery of oil, their financial prosperity entailed a hold over the East. Arabic language had already become popular in many of these countries and this led to the larger readership of Arabic literature. However, unlike the West, which systematically asserted their superiority over the Orient, Arabs did it in a passive tone by not looking into other cultures and subtly creating the narrative of the others being culturally as well as economically insignificant.

So far, seven Malayalam novels have been translated into Arabic. Two of them were translated from English by Arab writers. The remaining five were translated by Malayalam translators who learned Arabic as a foreign language. Saeed Hamadan, in an article titled “A case for translating Indian books into Arabic” talks about how Indian literature is entirely neglected in the Arab world, where Indian cinema on the other hand is widely popular. Mentioning the Arab publishing in India, he talks about translating from Indian languages, where around 90,000 books were published in 2013 (Hamadan). In “Why Malayalam fiction is being translated into Arabic?”, Binu Karunakaran quotes the translator of three notable works into Arabic, Suhail Abdul Hakeem who asks: “What do the people in Arab countries know about us apart from as economic immigrants in search of work?” (Karunakaran) This distorted image of Indians has a lot to do with the lack of their representation in the world of literature. And on this, Karunakaran quotes Mona Kareem to say that “Arabic publishers are doing nothing to challenge the status quo, they are still obsessed with western literature” (Karunakaran).

Here, translation of Orient by Orient goes against the popular notion of the translation as a representation of the other. As Lefevere puts it “[t]he translator should know the language of the author he translates to perfection and that he should have achieved the same excellence in the language he wants to translate into” (Lefevere 27). Naturally, as the author is writing in her native language, the translator will be a native of the target language. Hence, it becomes a representation of the other in their own language. However, in case of translating to Arabic, as we have seen, the translators are majorly non-Arabs, making the act of translation, a self-representation in another language/culture.

Loredana Polezzi in “Translation and migration” (2012) talks about how the migrants expressing themselves in the host language can be seen as self-translation, in which she includes the translation of works done in one’s mother tongue being translated to host language as well as the mental translation they necessarily have to do, while writing directly in a language other than their mother tongues (350). This is similar to a minor language speaker translating literature from her mother tongue to a major language. Even the motives behind these two actions – to be read and known in the host language – are identical. Here, self is not taken as an individual, but the member of the community as a whole. An author writing in third person narrative is also well suited to the said idea. Taking the example of *Aadujeevitham*, where Benyamin narrates the experience of Najeeb, the protagonist who migrates to the Middle East. When Suhail Abdul Hakeem translates it into Arabic as *Ayyamul Maiz*, he is still portraying Najeeb’s life, but through Benyamin’s words. When the book reaches the Arabs in Arabic, it

is Malayalis expressing themselves in the host language, which brings the author and translator to the same layer, if not same individuals, hence making it a self-translation. This can be assimilated with the fictional translation in *Saaq al-Bamboos*.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the contrast between two translations of a novel originally written in Arabic. One, translated into a Western language by a western translator, with some appropriations and modifications in order to make it fit the taste of the desired readership, and the other, translated into an Eastern language, emphasizing the accuracy. As translation is not a neutral, apolitical act of transmitting the meaning, the paper looked into the politics that resulted in the translation practices that guided each of them. Closely examining the translation theories that talk about the political aspect of translation and examining their applicability to the text the paper dealt with, the existing translation theories that appear to be Eurocentric. It contended that these theories cannot be applied to the translations that happen between Eastern languages.

University of Houston, USA

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