

Arab literature today – European experiences

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In a world in which translations of literary works are becoming more and more important for the understanding of other cultures, there are distinct gaps in most European book markets when it comes to creative writing from other countries. This is particularly true of literature from the Arab World.

Arabic is being studied increasingly at universities in Europe, but despite many people in Europe who speak the language, Arabic is still seen as a marginal language. Although the number of professional translators has been on the increase in recent years, there are still fairly few literary translators around.

Looking at figures, the marginal role of literature from the Arabic world on European book markets is obvious. Only a few authors enjoy worldwide fame and recognition. Of course, Naguib Mahfouz, Nobel prize for literature 1988, is widely translated and read. Amin Maalouf, Assia Djebar and Tahar Ben Jelloun, all living in Paris and writing in French, have also had international success and are shaping public opinion as to the realities in the Arab World.

The tendency for literary works by authors from the Arab world to remain widely unread in Europe – with a few exceptions of course – stands in marked contrast to the interest taken in the problems and conflicts of the region. For every fiction title from the region, there are at least two non-fiction books on most European markets. Most of these are written by self-styled or real European experts and deal with various aspects of developments in the Arab world.

It is amazing, however, that there is a fairly high number of translated books by Arab authors in most European countries, while on the other hand their role on the highly competitive book markets in Europe continues to be marginal.

At present there are more than 500 works of fiction by Arab authors in print in Germany. Less than half of them (about 200) have been translated from Arabic, while many of them are translations from French, mostly works by authors from Maghreb countries. Most translated authors are Egyptians (with Naguib Mahfouz in the lead), followed by authors from Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. Some Arab League member states simply do not exist for German readers and there are no translations available from these countries.

The figures tell a simple story: at present, German readers have the choice of more than 125,000 fiction titles (of which around 40% are translations). Of these, less than 0.3% are by authors from the Arab world.

Is funding of translations an effective measure?

Can this situation be influenced by corrective measures, especially by funding translations? The programme of translation grants organised by the Society for the Promotion of African, Asian and Latin American Literature started with a modest budget in 1984. Since then, more than 130 translations of books by Arab authors have been supported, with funds coming from the German Foreign Ministry and the Swiss cultural foundation Pro Helvetia. The majority of these translations were from Arabic. Among the authors in this programme were early translations of Naguib Mahfouz, Gamal al-Ghitani, Hanan al-Scheich, Adonis, Emil Habibi, Edwar al-Kharrat, Ibrahim al-Koni, Elias Khoury, Mahmud Darwish and

Abdallah Munif. Since German language publishers published only around 400 translations of books by Arab authors in the last 20 years or so, more than 20% of the translations were funded by this programme (list of supported titles at www.litprom.de). Many of these books were first-time translations into German of these authors. A sizeable number of poetry translations was also funded, especially in view of the fact that poetry often sells less well than novels. The tendency to support poetry publications is also a recognition of the fact that poetry plays a more important role in the Arab world than in Europe. The success of this programme shows that funding translations can make a difference.

For many years, there has been no coherent programme in the Arab world for funding translations of Arabic works of fiction into European languages. There have been some initiatives in the past, but it is only of late that such programmes, geared towards the relevant markets and well administered, are beginning to make an impact on European book markets. The translation programme of the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, launched for the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair 2007, is the latest, and the most ambitious edition of such noble endeavours.

No genuine interest in other parts of Europe yet

In France, Maghreb authors are more or less part and parcel of French literary life since most of them write in French. Authors writing in Arabic get less recognition when translated into French, even if the French government has supported some translations. In a large number of cases, not many copies are printed or sold. The specialised publishing house Actes Sud, which took over the ambitious series Sindbad founded by Pierre Bernard in the late eighties, rarely publishes more than 3,000 copies, even of works by renowned authors like Gamal al-Ghitani, Edwar al-Kharrat, Sonallah Ibrahim or Elias Khoury. Partly because it was made into a film, the novel *La Porte du Soleil* (bab ash-shams) by Elias Khoury crossed the 10,000 sales mark. And the novel *L'Immeuble Yacoubian* (Imarat Ya'qubyan) by Alaa al-Aswany was an enormous success with more than 100,000 copies sold, also because of the film based on the novel.

The sales figures in France for translations from Arabic are especially disappointing because the literary pages of, for example, *Le Monde* or *Libération* often carry lengthy reviews or portraits of these authors, while authors writing in French continue to dominate the scene. Nevertheless, the series editor of *Sindbad* at Actes Sud, the Syrian-born Farouk Mardam-Bey, can correctly claim that the Arab world's image is much more complex and truthful in these translations than in the dominant images concerning political conflicts.

The situation in the English-speaking world is slightly more difficult because few Arab authors write in English. Those few publishers who have committed themselves to publishing English translations of Arab authors (like Garnet and Quartet Books in the UK, and university presses in the USA like Syracuse University Press or Interlink Press) hardly reach high print runs. But the excellent publication *Banipal Magazine of Modern Arab Literature* manages to convey a fairly broad panorama of the diversity of Arab creative writing. The result of these publishing activities is a simple one: many important literary texts by Arab authors are available in translation for people to buy and read, although mass readerships are not reached (and some publishing ventures like a series of books by Arab women authors, published by Garnet, was abandoned after some time).

The situation of translation of contemporary Arab fiction would be worse if it were not for the ambitious translation programme of the American University in Cairo Press which has been publishing interesting authors in English translation and also handles the work of Naguib Mahfouz worldwide.

In countries where every text from the Arab world has to be translated (whether written in Arabic, French or English or other languages), the situation is probably less encouraging (with the exception maybe of Germany). In Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Italy, Poland, Russia or Hungary, Arab authors are mostly known in translation after they have been translated into English or French with satisfying sales (or if they have received an important literary award). It is not that there are no translations. But they are published mainly by small publishing houses. Most of the translations are the work of committed and competent translators who in most cases have some university connections. Spain is a slightly different case because of long and close links with the Arab world. But there is a marked difference between what is being translated because it might sell well, and what is being translated with a more scholarly (and sometimes political) interest as the driving force, invariably risking the consequence that the books will not sell.

The "Mahfouz" effect

It is no surprise that in all of Europe there has been a Mahfouz effect. Since then, translators who want to translate books by Arab authors whom they like have a slightly better chance of convincing a publisher to take on such an author (although most of these publishing houses are small). It is another common feature that most translations have been arranged by translators and committed individuals. This in turn has been seen by some Arab critics as something akin to a European conspiracy. Translations are seen only to happen when these translators like a certain book or author, which excludes the majority of Arab authors.

Decisions are made in Europe

There is no doubt that translations which do not reach readers are more or less academic undertakings. In other words: the decision of what should be translated should not be made according to the wishes of for example, Egyptian, Syrian or Moroccan authors and critics (and even less by ministries or scholarly institutions) but according to what readers in Europe might want to read in order to get to know creative writing from the Arab world. Stefan Weidner, one of the more successful translators from Arabic in Germany, once observed that without the committed work of these translators, there would be no Arab literature in Western languages.

What is "selling"?

There are, however, strong indications that European publishers, and also readers, have fairly powerful convictions and pre-conceived ideas of what Arab creative writing should be all about. Titles with the word "veil" sell better than titles which do not have direct connotations with things thought to be "oriental". Autobiographies of women singers, for example, although of a dubious literary quality, find more (women) readers than, say, the autobiography of Latifa az-

Zayyat (published in an interesting series of autobiographies translated into several European languages).

"Women in Islamic societies" is one of the cliché-ridden sales-orientated themes in publishing in Europe which of course also has its fads and fashions. For many years, the "veil" has been instrumental in creating a certain interest, likewise "violence against women" (including novels written by men).

Of late, there is a new trend: Arab women writing erotic stories. In some cases the author's identity is concealed for marketing and other reasons (a recent case is a novel written in French by an unknown North African woman author using the name of "Nedjma", an interesting reference to the title of the famous novel by the late Kateb Yacine) and it is fairly likely that some of these books were not even written by Arab women.

"The orient is a Western invention" wrote Abbas Beydoun, the Lebanese poet and critic, in reference to the fundamental analysis by the late Edward Said in his classic book "Orientalism". The ploys and strategies of some publishers in Europe to provide their readers with books which meet the readers' often prejudiced expectations of the "Orient", can only work, of course, if they find authors who write along the desired lines. Most Arab authors write for an Arab readership and they do not seem to be really interested in readers in Europe, while those narrative strategies employed by mostly US-American authors who are on bestseller lists in many countries are not in their focus.

What factors may explain the relative lack of interest in Arab creative writing in Europe?

There are fairly few serious reviews in the cultural pages of important papers, partly because of lack of knowledge, partly because of lack of continuity. There are a few exceptions: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Le Monde, Libération, The Guardian and El Pais, but most reviewing is confined to specialised publications with limited outreach. There is no real serious public literary discourse any longer regarding aesthetic consideration of Arab creative writing. Most universities hardly influence public opinion because of their ivory-tower situation and their interest in the past or in linguistic aspects of the Arab world. Only few universities teach contemporary Arab fiction, and there are no courses for literary translators, although there are non-academic translation centres with an interest also in Arabic.

Since publishing Arab fiction in translation is hardly a lucrative business, there is also very little by way of advertising, publicity and marketing investment. Joint ventures from several publishers with Arab titles for joint promotion are unknown in Germany and other European countries. There is, however, a laudable increase in poetry festivals which invite Arab poets in the same way as they invite poets from other parts of the world. And there are more and more Arab poetry festivals in several European countries.

Discouraging factors in the Arab world

There are also factors in the Arab world which do not encourage or satisfy the curiosity of European readers. The disorganised publishing sector in the Arab world and a limited culture of reading lead to many fiction titles by Arab authors not being very successful in the Arab world. Modern fiction in particular does not enjoy high print runs. Only few publishers have international business contacts,

very few of them control their authors' translation rights. Consequently, they are not very active in this field. At the same time, book fairs are mainly for direct selling, and not for selling rights or translation rights. Many translations of works by Arab authors find their way to a publisher in Europe in often very complicated ways, with translators frequently acting as committed go-betweens.

In other words: Arab fiction will be read and enjoyed in Europe by a growing number of readers only if it is being read and enjoyed in the Arab world as well. It is rather unfortunate that fairly often, Arab creative writing attracts the attention of Europeans only when it is censored, for example for religious reasons.

Listen to what the Arab world has to say

The Arab world was Guest of Honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair 2004. This event ran counter to the trend of continued tense relations between the Arab world and Europe. Since World War II, there have been deeply rooted lines of conflict, very strong misunderstandings and lack of communication, reason enough for a sober analysis of what has gone wrong. But Frankfurt 2004 was also an important opportunity for listening much more attentively than in the past to what the Arab world has to say. Book fairs are, after all, welcome opportunities where the voices of poets, storytellers and novelists are heard in a multi-faceted dialogue alongside those of presidents, ministers and diplomats.