

Geoffrey Nash

The Anglo-Arab Encounter

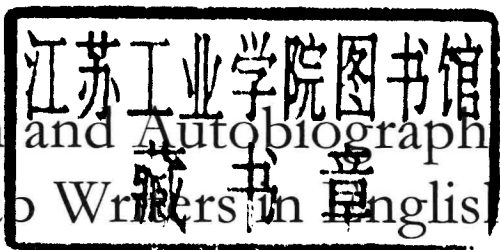
Fiction and Autobiography by
Arab Writers in English

Peter Lang

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FOR MINA

Once again, for your understanding and patience...

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Introduction

The Anglo-Arab Encounter

In this book I will be examining the corpus of a group of writers from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Sudan who have taken the decision to incorporate Arab subjects and themes into the English language. There is a qualitative difference between Arabic literature, Arabic literature translated into English, and a literature conceived and executed in English by writers of Arab background.¹ To explicate these differences and set out the parameters of my study I shall take Edward Said's term the 'Anglo-Arab encounter' as embodied in Anglophone fiction and autobiography by writers of Arab ethnicity. Overarching this category must be considered the formative influences on contemporary international literatures: the *postcolonial*, with its theorisation of inter-cultural relations by reference to the impact of colonialism and imperialism on non-Western literatures; the *internationalisation of literatures*, which is where the cutting-edge effects of globalisation impact today upon the production of writing for transnational markets; and *feminism*, in this case the issue of the transposition of specific Arab/Islamic feminisms (and the Western influences that went into their construction) into a literature composed for a non-Arab/Islamic audience. As far as Arab Anglophone writing is concerned, these conditions operate within the spaces first opened by the later twentieth century creation of international audiences and markets for non-Anglo-Saxon literatures in English (placing fiction by Arab writers in English in a similar context to that of African, Indian and other non Anglo-Saxon writers in English.)

1 Here it may be relevant to note the profile of Arabic literature in the West, tied up as it is with issues of translation. Said argued that this was hampered by a prevailing prejudice against Arabic literature in America (Said: 1990). Also, there is a widespread view that English translations of Arabic texts are often of poor quality. On both these issues see Salih Altoma (2005).

In addition to a thematic discussion of the specified texts attention will also be paid to the issue of writers' choice of language, expected audience and text reception. Contemporary Anglophone writers use English rather than Arabic as the language for their fiction/autobiography for a variety of reasons including personal preference, avoidance of cultural restriction and censorship, and to optimise exposure. For some ethnic Arab writers, embedded within an English-speaking environment either in their own country of origin or in Britain, English is virtually a native language and therefore a natural one to write in. Others, especially those for whom Arabic is their first language but who acquired English through the medium of education at a relatively late stage, may make a considered choice of English, aware that there will as a result be both losses and gains. Excluding the relatively small readership bilingual in Arabic and English, the writer must assume an audience predominantly Anglo-American or European in their cultural perspectives. Choosing to address such a readership necessitates cultural translation and all the problems inherent in trying to present an alien culture to the globally dominant one. This study will attempt to apply these insights to the topics under consideration. Though variegated and distinct, the work of each Anglophone writer of Arab origin contributes to a nexus of topics, the central link of which is the notion of Anglo-Arab encounter. Said foregrounded Arabs (supply: students, *émigrés*, immigrants, tourists and visitors) within an English setting dealing with English people, as central to such texts. The new crop of Arab writers in English engages with the West – primarily England – and in the process discrete identities, both Arab and English, are blurred, even hybridised.

Writing in 1992, Edward Said argued that while a considerable literature in English existed in the domains formerly colonised by Britain, in spite of its being once divided between Britain and France, the Arab world was an exception. Even compared with the literature in French produced in North Africa and Lebanon, the roster of writings by Arabs in English was on the whole unimpressive (Said: [1992] 2001, pp.405–7). In the decade and a half since these comments were written, the situation has been transformed. Ahdaf Soueif, whose novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*, Said was reviewing when he wrote the above, has received increasing critical exposure. She would appear to

be the most commercially viable of a growing number of writers of Arab ethnicity who use English. (It might be worth pointing out that her publisher, Bloomsbury, also owns the Harry Potter series.) Soueif's literary output begins with the transitional collection of stories, *Aisha* (1983), and moves through an engagement with cross-cultural sexual politics in, *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992), *Sandpiper* (1996), and the part historical romance, *Map of Love* (1999). Jamal Mahjoub, whose first three pieces of English fiction were published in the Heinemann 'African Writers' series, has disclosed Sudanese perspectives to the Anglo-Arab encounter. His first novel, *The Rainmaker*, like Soueif's early writing, was composed in the 1980s (1989). Together with, *Wings of Dust* (1994), and, *In The Hour of Signs* (1996), it creates a trilogy of writings interweaving strands of Sudanese history from the age of Gordon and the Mahdi, through the period of decolonisation, ending in the late eighties. However, Mahjoub is a writer who is wary of categorisation in terms of ethnicity. *The Carrier* (1998) widens the scope of cross-cultural inquiry to include Arab North Africa and Northern Europe in the Renaissance, while *The Drift Latitudes* (2006) adopts as its central focus the experience of a successful young woman of mixed Jamaican-German parentage.

British-Palestinian writer Tony Hanania has written three novels that are broadly concerned with Levantine settings juxtaposed alongside seemingly incongruent British ones. His acclaimed novel, *Home-sick* (1997), moves between English public school life and civil war in Lebanon. *Unreal City* (1999) fetches the westernised Lebanese hero back home where he joins the resistance movement, Hezbollah. Hanania's third novel, *Eros Island* (2000), presents again the central character of 'a young man of mixed parentage who is caught between the Middle East and the West, and who has a shaky sense of identity' (Tarbush: 2000, p.78). Jordanian writer and feminist, Fadia Faqir, engages with the struggle of Arab women against colonisation and indigenous patriarchy in her two strongly original novels, *Nisanit* (1987), and, *Pillars of Salt* (1994). In the latter work British involvement in Jordanian affairs takes the form of colonial army officers and a shadowy medical officer within the asylum where the novel's two main female protagonists are violently incarcerated. In the first decade

of the twenty-first century, a new phase in Faqir's fiction has emerged. Still challenging and experimental, her writing focuses on the migrant experience within the British context, while it carries over the concern with traditional patriarchal norms and their impact on Arab women on display in her earlier fiction. Leila Aboulela began publishing fiction at the beginning of the new century and while adopting similar topoi to the other Anglo-Arab writers, mixes migrant situations with changing neo-Muslim identity. Her debut novel, *The Translator* (2000), uses Scottish and Sudanese settings to highlight an Arab-Muslim woman's choice to establish a cross-cultural relationship with a Scottish academic on her own spiritual territory. This was followed by her collection of short stories, *Coloured Lights* (2001), which again mixes Sudanese and Scottish locations and probes cross-cultural relationships within a modern Islamic context. Aboulela's most recent novel, *Minaret* (2005), is ground-breaking in its representation of migrants endeavouring to establish a Muslim identity in London.

How can this sudden turn around – from the trickle of Anglo-phone novels by Arabs mentioned by Said in 1992, to the stream of authors and texts just cited – be accounted for? An effective way of responding to this question is, I suggest, to refer it to the frame of cultural translation pioneered a decade or so ago by Andre Lefevere and Susan Bassnett. Lefevere's study, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (1992), not only displaced the more narrowly based linguistic systems approach to translation, it instituted a systems theory of its own centred on the manner in which a literary canon in diverse cultures and periods is produced. Broadening the scope of translation to include alongside translators, editors, compilers of anthologies, and writers of literary histories and reference works, Lefevere promoted the concept of 'rewriting' to encompass all of these activities. By rewriting the text its position is reinforced or, if it is being introduced as a new text, confirmed into the canon. The system is presided over by the components of poetics, patronage and ideology; in the late twentieth century an 'undifferentiated' patronage applies, that is one in which the profit motive and the institutions that endeavour to enforce the poetics of the canon gain supremacy over the ideological component that was more operative in the past (Lefevere:

1992, p.19). Each participant in the process of rewriting is engaged in manipulation and power-play because 'all rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way' (p.vii).

To situate the emergence of Anglo-Arab writing, it might be argued that we need look no further than the market. But that would be to leave out the important role institutional (or quasi-institutional) actors such as literary prize-giving committees, reviewers (and even academics) play in the valorising of literary texts. For example, as Roger Allen notes, the awarding of the Nobel prize for literature to the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz in 1988 'may be seen as a significant watershed', even though it was Mahfouz's pre-1967 novels that the committee specifically cited (Allen: 2001, p.205). Allen's point in fact underlines Lefevere's insistence on the vital role played both by poetics and ideology in canonisation, since Allen argues that 'the Western world's plaudits in 1988 for Naguib Mahfouz as the author of [*The Cairo Trilogy*] a family saga written in Arabic and published in 1956–57 do point to some interesting questions regarding cultural hegemony and future directions for the Arabic novel' (p.207)). Not only was the English translation of *The Trilogy* given space on Western bookshelves, Mahfouz was thereby confirmed as an international author of note, although Allen opines:

none of those works written by the Nobel laureate in which he follows the more 'particularizing' trend [...] by attempting to utilize the styles and structures of more indigenous [i.e., Arab] narratives [...] – none of these translated works has earned a broad readership in European or Anglo-American markets (p.208).

(Some Arab critics went so far as to ask whether Mahfouz's apparent endorsement of the 1978 Camp David agreement between Egypt and Israel did not also help weigh the balance in his favour for the Nobel committee.) If it was mainly a partial, 'westernised' Mahfouz who was well received by a Western readership, Anglo-Arab writers take note: a literature taken as too tied to the unfamiliar codes and pre-occupations of Arabic literary culture would be unsuccessful unless it were domesticated to meet the expectations of a Western readership.

A further not unrelated dimension to the issue of the successful emergence of work by Arabs writing in English is embedded in the traumatic politico-cultural history of the Arab world in the twentieth century, which Allen outlines in his survey of the Arabic novel (Allen: 1995a). To the extent that Arab and Islamic-oriented events in recent history have impacted on the West, it might be argued, the level of interest they have raised feeds into a dissemination and consumption of texts that might be deemed to interface with (and even partially 'explain') those events, the most obvious recent instance being 11 September 2001. We would be justified in concluding this had a direct influence on the remarkable increase in sales of translations of the Qur'an in the United States and Europe. Similarly, the success in the United States of the novel, *The Kite Runner* (2005), by the Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini, is surely related to America's intervention against the Taliban regime in 2001. The emergence of Anglo-Arab writing in the last decade of the twentieth century could therefore be influenced by factors of this kind. To further apply Lefevere's argument, we might see in the breakthrough of a 'Third World' writer like Salman Rushdie via the institution of the British Booker prize in the mid-1980s, a process spectacularly inflected by the *Satanic Verses* affair at the end of the decade, an opening up of the increasingly sterile looking Anglo-American literary canon to writers from outside (Brennan: 1989). The 1990s, a decade which started with the Gulf War and which saw the West's lateral perception of the Middle East stimulated by the Oslo accords, terrorist attacks on foreign tourists in Egypt, and the emergence of Osama Bin Laden-style attacks on visible Western targets abroad, widened this space, making way for a new crop of Anglo-Arab writers to present 'insiders' narratives apparently starting out from Arab and Islamic source cultures. Soueif's novel, *A Map of Love*, was placed on the Booker list for 1999, while other British-connected Arab authors also achieved prominence. Hanan al-Shaykh, Ghada Karmi, and Leila Aboulela, each had their work either serialised or presented and discussed on BBC radio in the early 2000s. All of this suggests that a combination of topicality, and the openness of publishers and prize committees to new 'ethnic' material, created an environment favourable to the rewriting of both Anglo-Arab and Arabic texts in translation into an enlarged literary