

**The Critic/ Translator at Work: Translational Strategies in**

*At-Tabi' Yanhad* by Radwa Ashour

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الناقد مترجماً: دراسة لاستراتيجيات الترجمة

في كتاب التابع ينهض لرضوى عاشور

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**Abstract:**

This paper focuses on the use of translation as an integral part of a postcolonial literary critical project and takes Radwa Ashour's approach to translation in the book titled *At-Tabi' Yanhad: Ar-Riwayah fi Gharb Afriqia* [*The Follower Rises: The Novel in West Africa*] (1980/2016) as a case in point. On the one hand, the paper examines Radwa Ashour's 'voice' as a 'translator' of the entire body of extracts cited in the study. The analysis is framed by Theo Herman's views (2014) that translations are by nature ironic and do not establish immediate mimetic relationships with the source, which entails that committed translators do have a stance that they express. It is the role of the informed reader to elicit the positioning of the translator/ critic. The research also adopts a broader view of the work that counts as translation based on Pascal Cassanova's (2010) affirmation that translational transactions include introductions and critical works that combine commentary/ criticism and translation of full works/ extracts. As such, the paper proposes that Ashour acted both as critic and translator and in this capacity devised an approach termed as 'critical selectivity' particularly marked with comparison and commentary. It was through this approach that her 'voice' is communicated explicitly and implicitly to the reader who interprets it. On the other hand, the paper examines Ashour's position on the linguistic dilemma faced by writers from Africa post-independence due to the local/ international dichotomy and the related issue of asserting identity versus wider readership and acclaim when writing in a "dominating language" (Cassanova, 2010) such as English or French. The paper argues that in engaging with such issues and in producing this study in Arabic, Ashour was a pioneer in introducing translational strategies invoking postcolonial concerns with the issue of language and its connections to identity politics.

الناقد مترجما: دراسة لاستراتيجيات الترجمة

في كتاب التابع ينهض لرضوى عاشور

تركز هذه الدراسة على استخدام الترجمة بوصفها جزء لا يتجزأ من المشروع النقدي ما بعد الكولونيالي وتتخذ من كتاب رضوى عاشور التابع ينهض: الرواية في غرب أفريقيا (٢٠١٦/١٩٨٦) نموذجا تطبيقيا. ويتناول البحث من ناحية مسألة "صوت" رضوى عاشور "المترجمة" الذي يتردد في العمل إذ اضطلعت بترجمة جل المقتطفات التي اقتبستها في دراستها – باستثناء رواية واحدة. ويستند هذا التحليل من حيث المفاهيم إلى مقال ثيو هيرمنز (٢٠١٤) الذي يؤكد فيه أن الترجمة بطبيعتها حمالة أوجه وليست عبارة عن مجرد محاكاة مباشرة للنص المترجم، ما يعني أن المترجم الملتزم بقضية لديه موقف ينقله من خلال الترجمة. ومن ثم يأتي دور القارئ المستنير في استنطاق موقع المترجم بل والناقد في حالتنا. ويعتمد البحث أيضا نظرة أشمل للمقصود بالعمل المترجم مبنية على تأكيد باسكال كازانوف (٢٠١٠) على اشتغال فعل الترجمة على أنواع أخرى بجانب العمل المترجم كاملا من قبيل المقدمات والأعمال النقدية التي تجمع ما بين التعليق/ النقد وترجمة العمل الكامل أو مقتطفات منه. وعلى ذلك يرى البحث أن عاشور لعبت دور الناقد والمترجم مجتمعين وأنها خرجت بهذه الصفة بنهج أطلق عليه البحث اسم "الانتقاء النقدي" يتسم على وجه الخصوص باستراتيجيتين وهما المقارنة والتعليق المباشر. ومن خلال هذا النهج يصل "صوت" رضوى عاشور إلى القارئ صراحة وضمنا. ويدرس البحث من ناحية أخرى موقف عاشور من المعضلة اللغوية التي يفرضها واقع ما بعد الاستقلال على الكتاب الأفارقة بسبب التأرجح ما بين المحلي والدولي وما يستتبعه من الوقوع في مأزق الاختيار بين التأكيد على الهوية والرغبة في تحقيق الانتشار بين القراء والحصول على التقدير الدولي عند الكتابة بلغة "مهيمنة" (كازانوف، ٢٠١٠) مثل الإنجليزية أو الفرنسية. وبذلك يدفع هذا البحث بأن انخراط رضوى عاشور فيما سبق ذكره من مسائل فضلا عن اختيارها الكتابة باللغة العربية ومخاطبة القارئ العربي إنما يجعلها رائدة في تقديم استراتيجيات ترجمة جديدة تستلهم انشغالات نظرية ما بعد الكولونيالية ومفاهيمها بمسألة اللغة وعلاقتها بسياسات الهوية تحديدا.

## The Critic/ Translator at Work: Translational Strategies in

### *At-Tabi' Yanhad* by Radwa Ashour

#### Introduction

In the field of translation studies many works are dedicated to conceptualizing the postcolonial approach to translation and the translation of postcolonial literature across the broad span of genres. However, not much attention has been given to the politics and poetics of the translation within the realm of literary criticism per se, which is important due to the close ties between literary critical practice and ideology-informed positions. Translation into Arabic indeed plays an important role in the field of literary criticism and literary critical theory since most modern critical theory is produced in languages other than Arabic. This paper is not concerned with full translations of critical theory or ideas between Arabic and other languages; it rather focuses on the use of translation as an integral part of a literary critical project and takes Radwa Ashour's approach to translation in the book titled *At-Tabi' Yanhad: Ar-Riwayah fi Gharb Afriqia* [*The Follower Rises: The Novel in West Africa*] (1980/2016) as a case in point. Radwa Ashour's non-fiction critical works are part of her larger project as a writer/ scholar concerned with the culture and the history of the Arabs, particularly Palestinians, and with establishing connections between Arabs and the larger African and Third World context. Such connections are developed from an ideological/ committed position supportive of informed political resistance both to external oppressors and to internal injustice, which is expressed in diverse ways, of which translation is one. The paper argues that through selective acts of translation and through the employment of specific translational strategies, the ideologically-oriented literary critic/ scholar could open new horizons in the host/ receiving cultural scene and help create new affinities between the sending and the receiving cultures. Therefore, translation could be one of the elements employed by the critic/ scholar to advance their literary critical project and to enable interventions in the literary critical scene of the host culture that would not have been made possible without translation. This paper aims to contribute to the body of research that examines and analyzes interventionist strategies used consciously by translators which make them visible engaged translators and active contributors to the body of

knowledge into which they are translating. The paper also argues that although Ashour was the author of the book, the nature of the topic naturally placed her in the role of a translator and in this capacity she offered a multilayered translational strategy that could be replicated by authors/translators in the context of writing /translating – particularly when dealing with literary critical/ cultural texts in Arabic. Then the paper situates such translational efforts within the larger framework of postcolonial scholarship occupied primarily with the import of the issue of language on identity and accessibility to readers in international markets.

*At-Tabi' Yanhad* is not the only book produced in Arabic dealing with the African novel or literature and by necessity producing or reproducing translation of extracts from such works (whether from European or local languages)<sup>1</sup>; nonetheless, it is one of the few studies that selects extracts based on a critical perspective of commitment and that focuses on the question of language and translation. The organization of the book is also illustrative of the concerns of the author and her incessant attention to writing as a craft that requires constant honing – see her testimony, “My Experience with Writing” (1988/1993). The book is divided into eight chapters, each dedicated to examining one or more writers based on stylistic qualities and thematic issues. Thus, one chapter deals with the use of traditional popular forms; the other examines the position of writers affiliated to the Negritude movement; another deals with the use of sarcasm in reacting to the dire reality of society; and the final two analytical chapters reflect on the leftist leanings of the author, with one dedicated to the proletariat novel and the other to the novel post independence. This analysis is preceded by a preface and an introductory chapter that set the tone for the entire book and that give the role of translation urgent priority for the creation of a strong critical movement, scholarly research, and popular interest in African literature, which is believed to be important to confront “the cultural intimidation” exercised

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<sup>1</sup> Ali Shalash, for example, produced a volume titled *African Literature* (1993) covering the entire spectrum of genres and languages (unlike Ashour he dealt with works in Portuguese as well). His work acknowledges the socio-political nature of African literature. However, his focus was to present a broad representation and classification of such works according to the key characteristics of each genre. Also, the journal *Alif* produced a volume titled “Literature and Anthropology in Africa” in 1997, which included Arabic contributions.

by the “mouthpieces of imperial culture” (*At-Tabi’ Yanhad* 8)<sup>2</sup>. The closing chapter (8) titled “The Issue of Language” is indeed what makes Ashour’s study relevant both to literary production and criticism, on the one hand, and to the role of language as a central issue in postcolonial studies, on the other.

### **Ashour’s Translational Strategies**

In her capacity as a critic/ translator, Ashour primarily orients the discussion towards the Arab reader suggesting the necessity of cultural communication among Third World countries in general, with a special focus on African countries, due to the close affinities she believes to exist between such contexts and those of the Arabs on all levels, social, political, and artistic (8). Out of this conviction arises another, namely the indispensability of translation: “It is incumbent on our universities to undertake the task of teaching and disseminating such works [arts and literatures of Africa] among students with a view to training a generation of **translators**, researchers, and critics in this field” (8; emphasis mine). She applies this conviction on her own work and on her personal experience as a translator, which influenced the method governing the structure of *At-Tabi’ Yanhad*. One of the main reasons cited by Ashour behind the extensive quotes, summaries, and paraphrasing from the examined novels was the lack of translations – to date<sup>3</sup> – into Arabic of any of the works tackled. Therefore, Ashour felt that in view of the lack of translations, the wider base of Arab readers did not have access to such works in their original languages (primarily English and French) (9). This factor was, therefore, behind her decision to undertake “the burdensome task” of translating the selected extracts into Arabic (9). From the perspective of Arabic as a target language and culture, Ashour dwells on the role of translation in raising awareness of political and ideological struggles and of common human ties as expressed in the source literatures produced in languages other than Arabic. *At-Tabi’ Yanhad* could be seen as a model of translation based on combining critique with translation of extracts from longer works, providing in the process cultural and ideological interventions in the receiving culture. Despite the fact that the

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from Ashour’s *At-Tabi’ Yanhad* are done by the author of the article.

<sup>3</sup> With the exception of the translation by Angel Botrous Samaan of Chinua Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which appeared in 1971, there were no African novels produced in Arabic translation at the time.

treatise is not comprised of a single translational transaction, it could be considered holistically as such. In addressing *At-Tabi' Yanhad* as introducing translational strategies, the paper is adopting the broad view of translated works introduced by Cassanova (2010), according to which introductions and other types of critical works are included within the domain of translation based on a proposition “to enlarge the notion of translation to include numerous “transactions” which are normally subsumed under the term ‘translation’” (9).

The paper relies in analyzing Ahsour’s approach on focusing on her ‘voice’ as a translator as discerned through textual and contextual clues provided throughout the book; and takes as a frame of reference Theo Herman’s article “Positioning Translators: Voices, Views and Values in Translation” (2014). The basic assumption of this article is that “all translating can be seen to have the translator’s subject position inscribed in it” (286); and the ensuing question is “how do translators signal attitudes, subject positions, opinions and value judgments in translations?... How can we, as receivers, register their positionings?” (287). Accordingly, the translator employs certain actions that reveal his/her positioning including ‘framing’ and ‘code-switching’ as well as evoking irony, which ultimately means that translations are not simply “mimetic”, i.e. they do not merely represent the original, but also “contain a diegetic element, a margin within which the translator’s agency and attitude can be articulated” (294). In this model, the reader plays a significant role in the reception of the translation: “That speculation [of the translator’s position] is the reader’s work, and it takes place even in the absence of explicit statements signaling the translator’s intent. It is therefore the reader who chooses to read a translation as an intervention, to make a translator’s attitude towards a translated text relevant” (297). Thus, Hermans advocates a ‘tactical’ mode of reading (borrowed from Martin and White 2005 (Hermans 290)), which “keeps the translational frame alive, including any textual or contextual indicators of the translator’s attitude towards the work being presented in translation, and lets that knowledge inform and indeed inflect... the actual translation” (299). It is a dynamic process of negotiating the discourse of the translation with the discourse of translator: “The sum total of the perceptions that result from recipients accomplishing these shifts constitutes the translator’s individual and social signature”

(Hermans299). Being a critical and postcolonial anthology of translations, Ashour's translation effort is best read from the perspective of her positioning. She translates extracts from novels that represent the colonial encounter in West Africa; extracts from African or pro-African criticism; and excerpts from the European tradition that either deal with the African literary production or otherwise. In addition Ashour weaves within these three layers of discourse her own 'voice' as a unifying element tying the arguments in a way sympathetic with the multiple voices she presents and represents from West Africa. As Hermans suggests, the reader is at times provided with explicit frames that reflect the translator's position and at other times invited to discern and interpret this position. The strategy at work plays the different layers of discourses to lead the informed reader towards her position. Although the paper does not analyze the translated extracts selected from the novels/ works of criticism, generally speaking, Ashour offers 'straightforward' translations of the extracts from fiction and criticism and adheres to the use of modern standard Arabic even in dialogues among characters. Therefore, her positioning is more or less identified from the 'narrator's voice' she employs to link all the disparate parts in the book together. Ashour's approach introduces a new strategy to translating ideology-oriented texts that could be called 'critical selectivity'. By taking up a mass of works and weaving her own voice within translation, Ashour manages to make interventions in the predominant criticism about African literature at the time. Through this mindset of the informed critic/ translator, Ashour produces her own 'reading' of the African novels not tied by literalness or otherwise; and without having to be concerned with the 'right' amount of footnotes or the question of prefacing. This method of translation enables the engaged translator to become 'visible' without imposing on the text. Ashour had the ability – as her works and training testify – to produce a translation or more of any of the African novels appearing in her book; however, she opted for producing this critical anthology<sup>4</sup>. As such, she covered a broader spectrum, engaged African criticism, intervened in western critical discourse produced at the time about Africa, brought to the fore

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<sup>4</sup> As mentioned in the closing of the preface to the book, Ashour even had hoped that, probably with more institutional support and contributions by other researchers, sequels for this book would be produced to cover the entire oeuvre of novels across Africa. This is why she stated that this book is volume I (12).

her resistance politics; while most importantly making her ‘voice’ clearly heard.

There is a large body of research investigating the agency of the translator based on commitment and the strategies employed to make his/her voice heard by the reader is. As such, this paper tries to build on the body of scholarship that analyzes and delineates ‘strategies’ employed by translators working from a position of commitment. The spectrum of this type of research is quite diverse including gender/feminist-oriented translation (von Flotow, 1991; in which she explores the use of prefacing and footnoting, for example in translations that qualify as ‘feminist translation’). Likewise another line of research focuses on translation as a means of resistance on a collective scale in contexts of colonization such as Maria Tymoczko’s work (1999 and 2000) on the approach employed by Irish translators from a postcolonial perspective and their contribution to resistance. Venuti, however, addresses strategies deployed by translators for purposes of resistance on an individual scale in his discussion of the individual translator resisting some of the stories streamed through international media, “who would play havoc with the global cultural economy” and in turn “can stage a transgression on the basis of a foreign text, possibly violating the business ethics that entails the production of a commodity in favor of a politically oriented ethics of cultural and social exchange” (22). Translational strategies utilized in activist contexts are explored by Mona Baker and Perez Gonzalez. Thus, in “Translation as an Alternative Space for Political Action” (2013), Baker explores through her theorization on translational activities as part of a larger narrative, how the strategy employed by activist translators “does not reproduce texts but constructs cultural realities, ... by intervening in the processes of narration and renarration that constitute all encounters, and that essentially construct the world for us” (Baker 24). Perez Gonzalez (2010), on the other hand, focuses on “an instance of mediation undertaken by individuals who do not hold any qualifications in translation” (263) and the approach with which such activist ‘non-translators’ – as he calls them – embark on translational activities on an ad hoc basis to leave a single print of their intervention. As disparate as such studies are, they attempt to methodologically reflect on the bearing the translator’s strategies have on achieving a real difference from a position of commitment.

Influenced by postcolonial discourse on the issue of language post independence and its connection to political commitment and resistance to the influences exercised by former colonizers, Ashour's translational strategy of 'critical selectivity' involves comparison and critical commentary. It is comparative in the sense that she does not simply provide a critical analysis of the works selected for her study of the novel in West Africa; on the contrary, Ashour draws on the full repertoire of the European novelistic tradition that serves as a point of reference, departure, or distinction when compared with the African novels; she also juxtaposes the works of the African novelists themselves with a view to commenting on their technique, style, and politics. Comparison extends to the body of criticism whether produced in the Anglo-American tradition or by – the now – classic figures of African postcolonial critique: Fanon, Achebe, and Ngugi; in the sense that their voice is projected both vis-à-vis the novels examined and at times their voice is examined against that of the Anglo-American/ European critics. Through comparison an intricate network is woven for the Arabic reader. In the introductory chapter, Ashour starts by drawing a comparison between the motives that drive the production of art in Africa in its early days in the sixties and seventies and those upon which European artists acted. Through this comparison, Ashour is establishing for the reader the fact that art in Africa – and for that matter in the Arab world – cannot but be involved in the socio-political intricacies represented in creative writing (19). Therefore, she establishes from the outset that “the majority of contemporary fiction in Africa has a political nature and reflects a social view; and this commitment to political issues ... led western critics to censure the African writer for, a so-called, excessive zeal” (19). In the following two pages, Ashour refutes this criticism leveled against Africans by providing a brief historical overview of the “objectivity” assumed by European artists since the second half of the eighteenth century, which took the extreme form among the Romantics through expression of alienation and isolation and was epitomized in Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, who represented the artist as an indifferent omnipotent god (19-20). On the contrary, the African artist “voluntarily pays from his life and art the debt owed by his ancestors and plays a didactic role, confirming that African art has always had a prominent social role” (21). The comparison with which the first chapter

opens is concluded with the assertion that the “scholar of the novel in West Africa” shall always be confronted with the fact that the homeland will always be the “center” for the artist and his/her major preoccupation (23). Another interesting comparison with the European tradition is invoked in the closing chapter when Ashour cites Sartre’s judgment on the use of French by the African poets included in his anthology *Black Orpheus* and the fact that they violently forge a new language out of French. This statement is followed by a comment maintaining that this destruction of language of the oppressor is not “a meditative position” or the sheer outcome of “formal rebellion” but rather is driven by the question: “Even if the language imposed on me is destroyed; and as such I assert my rejection of the owner of this language who oppressed me, how could I move forward to formulate an expression of my own experience” (143-144). In both instances of comparison, the reader receives from the critic/ translator direct translations from critical/ fiction texts from both sides of the divide who also highlights the fact that the drivers influencing choices of Africans are political, pertinent, and real; they are not the outcome of the luxury of dwelling on the personal but are informed by the urgency of the collective cause.

The comparison is also structural, in the sense that one of the structural lines of the book is to discuss the reception of such novels and the intended audience that the novelists probably had in mind. Within the larger discussion of Negritude and the works associated with the movement, Ahsour comments on the reception of novel *The Dark Child* by Camara Laye both in the West and in Africa. To her, this novel representing an unrealistic idyllic picture of Africa was overrated; and received this warm welcome only because it resonated with current western views at the time. She supports this intuition with a lengthy quote by the Cameroonian writer Mongo Beti who censured Laye’s approach (45-46). In chapter (4), titled “The mask of sarcasm: Two writers from Cameroon”, Mongo Beti’s *The Poor Christ of Bomba* is cited with extensive translations and comments on the fact that his novel provides a deeper analysis of the ailments of society, particularly the elites who are completely isolated from their reality (79-80). This view is also supported by an extract from Ngugi wa Thiongo. In the same vein of weaving the translation, commentary, and comparison, the chapter is concluded with a brief statement by Ashour on the fact that Beti and Ferdinand Oyono– the

two novelists discussed in this chapter – were able to overcome the sensitivities arising from the feeling experienced by the African writer of being constantly under scrutiny of the foreign “gaze” and were not concerned either with producing African literature that caters for the western readership desiring to see the tranquil beauty of Africa (83). Thus, the two examples show that the comparative approach employing translations juxtaposed for the reader the distinction between the European approach to fiction/ art and that of the African. Given the declaration made from the outset, that African novels cannot be read independently from political commitment to resistance, the comparison also sheds light on power relations associated with publishing and reception politics and the response of West African writers accordingly. After having produced the extracts from the novels and after having commented on the reception of the novels in the home countries and abroad, the reader is also led to compare and decide whether it is better to have a wide base of readership at the expense of creating an exotic image of Africa that western audiences desired at the time, or to address oneself to a more limited audience while freeing oneself from the constraints of self-censorship aimed at pleasing the intended reader – in this case the western reader. Thus, through this comparative approach, varieties within the repertoire of the West African novel were highlighted, while providing nuanced commentary on the manifestations of commitment as gleaned from the works and the criticism addressing their writers.

Another key feature of the engaged strategy is ‘critical commentary’, which enables the reader at certain points to discern Ashour’s positioning. From the outset, the book is declared as a critical treatise that does not shy away from addressing literature of a political nature and that draws on critical views on the West African novel from within the body of writings by Africans themselves with the objective of providing an informed counter version to ‘biased’ or ‘arrogant’ (Ashour 8-9) positions by western critics. Translation of extracts from literature and other texts was an ‘inevitable’ task in view of the lack of translations into Arabic of novels from Africa (at the time of writing the book). As much as Ashour steps back and lets the works speak for themselves, the text is interspersed with personal comments that emphasize Ashour’s position supportive of committed literature that connects the concerns of the society within which it is produced with the themes and characters in

works of fiction. Technically, Ashour tries to make such comments as seamless as she could and therefore decides, for instance, against using footnotes in the entire work – with a couple of exceptions where she comments on the titles of the novels. The comments are rather inserted within the text. In addition to the prefatory and introductory chapters in which Ashour's position is explicitly stated whereby she situates African literature against the backdrop of liberationist efforts post-independence, and establishes the book as a treatise focused on giving voice in Arabic to works refuting fallacies and racist views of Africa and its people and culture, the analyses of the extracts from fiction and criticism include comments betraying Ashour's personal support and appreciation for the type of literature she translates and introduces to the Arab reader.

The comments made explicitly in the body of the text could be seen to serve two purposes: the first contributes to the comparative framework that highlights the pursuit of collective best interest; and the second establishes Ashour's position vis-à-vis the question of liberation from oppression in Africa and its representation in literature. The comparisons drawn serve to confirm the connections between the Arab/Egyptian socio-cultural reality with the African counterparts. As such, while dealing with the works of Amos Tutuola and the extent to which he relies on Yoruba traditional heritage rooted in tales representing the collective experience of the group, she maintains that Tutuola's position could be compared to that of the group bard. "He is also the bearer of the group wisdom, knowledge and historical experience (and in the skills of the bard playing the rebec in our Egyptian society we could perhaps see a picture very close to that of the storyteller in West African communities)" (27). Ashour is conscious of her intended Arab/ Egyptian reader and most of the time; her "social signature" (Hermans 299) is inferred by the reader who is also invited to synthesize the translated extracts and the critical views with his/her own frame of reference from the Arab culture and literature. Thus, in very few cases similar to this one is the reader provided with an explicit direct reference. Allusion is also made to Roman mythology; but this time with the intention of proving by negation that action by African figures is targeted and meaningful. In the discussion of Sembene Ousmane's novel *God's Bits of Wood* (1970), Ashour maintains that in the actions of the character Maimouna and "her revolutionary struggle" (111), there are "echoes of the image of the

goddess Fortuna; this blindfolded woman who controls the Wheel of Fortune with her hands, only to bring down those up the scale and vice versa with the sheer turning of the Wheel” (111). Ashour’s comment, however, is that though sharing Fortuna’s blindness and the ability to effect change, Maimouna’s actions are not random. Her activities are rather governed by a “consciousness that confers on life its noble human meaning” (111). Through this and other cultural references, the reader is led by Ashour to identify shared grounds with African values as expressed in fiction; and to infer that although African traditions in general are seen as backward, if not by all Europeans, then at least by some, when compared to other traditions – none less than the European – they appear to be more human and more concerned with the collective good, rather than being individualistic and detached.

The other type of engaged comments could be categorized as expressive of the critic’s/ translator’s personal voice and indicative of the ideological position that the artist in Africa/ Third World does not have the luxury of producing art for art’s sake or of failing to engage with the socio-political reality of his/ her society. This strategy is best exemplified in Ashour’s comment on Camara Laye’s novel *The Dark Child* (1971). She notes the idyllic picture Laye delineates of Africa as if it were some kind of a Paradise Lost (45); this observation is situated within the larger line by writers of the Negritude movement who preferred to glorify an ideal African past at the expense of the dire reality. Thus, Ashour asks the question: “What about the colonial reality of this novel published in 1953, when Guinea was crackling with voices calling for independence? **Not one word**” (45; my emphasis). Commenting on the sequel of the novel titled *A Dream of Africa [Dramous]*, Ashour questions Laye’s conspicuous support of colonial rule:

The reader stops warily before this dialogue [translated in the paragraph preceding this comment]; however, he remains reserved before passing a general judgment concerning the overall position of the writer. And tells himself – or at least this is what I have told myself – “it is very difficult for a significant African writer of Camara Laye’s weight to turn into a defender of colonialism ...old colonialism.” Nonetheless, the forthcoming pages of the novel bear one

shocking situation after the other; until the position becomes clear enough beyond any doubt. (48)

Radwa Ashour pursues this dialogue between herself and the novel after having provided the reader with another translated extract, only to conclude:

We wonder, what made Camara Laye turn into a defender of colonialism? The novel largely provides a response to this question. Laye had wanted his novel to be a severe censure of the ruling regime in Guinea; but was ultimately led to the trap of preferring French colonialism to the national ruling regime in his country. (49)

The purpose of the two lengthy quotes is to reflect on the framing of the translations. Ashour reveals to the reader the feeling of bewilderment she experienced upon examining the position of the author. She could not dismiss Laye's position as naive or pro-colonialist offhandedly. Being a critic herself, she was aware of Laye's importance in the literary scene. However, it was not possible to ignore all the signposts in the dialogue of the novel that suggest the preferment of colonial rule – which arises, as Ashour suggests later in her discussion of the novel, from support to a fundamentalist and conservative view of an ideal Africa – to the current negative state of his country. Technically, Ashour does not frequently resort to this method of direct intervention as a reader herself rather than an academic critic. Thus, it is encountered in few other occasions and particularly invoked when a degree of 'sympathy' with the choices of the novelists is appealed to. Commenting on the character of the neo-African fascinated with all that is western delineated by Ayi Kwei Armah in his novel *Fragments* (1973), Ashour describes the representation as 'simple' and 'caricature-like' (123). However, she immediately steps in with the personal voice to the novelist's defense stating that this non-sophisticated approach "is driven by an angry and rejectionist attitude ... (**which does not mean, of course, that this picture is untrue or not indicative**)" (123; my emphasis). Similarly, while discussing Wole Soyinka's novel *Season of Anomy* (1973), Ashour commends the focused attention of the intellectual on restoring the past of his ancestors rather than on 'slogans', and immediately brushes aside the possibility that she is detracting from the formalities of resistance by affirming "all due respect to the value of

all such things [i.e. chants and slogans]” (135). Ashour signals her own value judgments both implicitly and explicitly throughout the entire book. Through her strategies that rely on juxtaposition and comparison she invites the reader to identify her position as a critic supportive of committed literature.

### **Language in the Postcolonial Context as a Frame to Translation**

Ashour’s work frames the issue of language as a central question to liberation and interaction between intellectuals and public in former colonies; highlights the critical role that the choice of a metropolitan language (English or French) plays; addresses the different ways in which such a language is used in reflecting the ongoing interaction between writers from the (former) colonies and Western readers and critics; and unravels the impact of this interaction on the representation of Africa to such readers. The book is also framed by language; Ashour’s choice of Arabic as a medium of expression (though she was perfectly capable and trained to write in English) is in itself an alternative that reflects a possible response to the question on language a writer from a former colony has to grapple with. Such issues on the relationship between language, on the one hand, and identity, cultural, and socio-political reality, on the other, were addressed by early – now canonical – works on postcolonialism<sup>5</sup>. However, Bill Ashcroft’s proposed definition of postcolonial studies in *The Future of Postcolonial Studies* (2015), i.e. twenty-five years post his earlier volume *The Empire Writes Back*, shows that Ashour’s questions are still relevant. In the closing chapter titled “Future Thinking”, Ashcroft sees postcolonial theory as:

That branch of contemporary theory that investigates, and develops propositions about the cultural and political impact of European conquest upon colonized societies and the nature of those societies’ responses. The term refers to postinvasion and postindependence; it identifies neither a chronology nor a specific ontology – it is not “after colonialism” nor is it a way of being. (235)

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<sup>5</sup> “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak, 1988); *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (Ashcroft et al., 1989); and *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha, 1994).

In light of this definition, Ashour's views on the relationship between language, literature, history, and politics expressed in this book can be read as among the early complex postcolonial analyses par excellence. In discussing the politics of language and the implications of using the language of the colonizer post-independence, Ashour poses in the eighties questions that postcolonial scholars still find applicable nowadays. The focus that Ashour places on the question of language also resonates with that of postcolonial translation studies: "So how were the colonies, emerging from colonialism, to ... find a way to assert themselves and their own culture, to reject the appellative of 'copy' or 'translation' without at the same time rejecting everything that might be of value that came from Europe?" (Bassnett and Trivedi 5). Thus, *At-Tabi' Yanhad* could be seen to contribute to both postcolonial scholarship and to postcolonial translation studies despite the fact that it is not concerned with translation per se and was published well before the field of translation studies had developed and proliferated particularly in the Arab world. Nevertheless, the treatment of language as a crosscutting concern featuring in the book intersects with approaches to translation that propose the central role of the translator/ writer in the interaction between languages and cultures and the centrality of translation in postcolonial and other contexts of ideological struggle. Therefore, the discussion of the role of language and translation in the book is double-layered: on the one hand, Ashour acts as a translator herself and provides a model for translational intervention where the translator is visible and is committed. On the other, Ashour comments on language and translation as important elements with a strong import on the understanding of the cultural and socio-political interaction between African nations – with their newly gained independence – and the established European former colonizers.

The "impact of European conquest upon colonized societies" (235) in Ashcroft's terms and the response of such societies could be also read in parallel with the line of studies on the power relationships among languages internationally. Moreover, Ashour's work with its discussion of the dynamics between established European languages (and the inevitable history and cultural heritage borne by the language) embodies links between postcolonial scholarship and scholarship on the sociology of translation such as Heilbron's who speaks in geo-political terms with respect to languages which are translated from. Using the terms 'center'

and ‘periphery’ to refer to translational-linguistic disparity<sup>6</sup>, Heilbron argues that “the more central a language is in the translation system, the more it has the capacity to function as an intermediary or vehicular language, that is as a means of communication between language groups which are themselves peripheral or semi-peripheral” (435). Moreover, Heilbron also argues that publishing a translation or a work by an “author from a semi-peripheral language” in international centers achieves what is described as “international recognition” of such works (436), which is a situation that Ashour acknowledges in relation to West African novelists. Ashour’s views also echo the developments suggested by Casanova in her article “Consecration and Accumulation of Literary Capital” (2010) on this notion of the importance of language choice and translation in terms of making the work visible in the market and by readers and of the position of the work in what is termed as “the world literary market” (4) . Her argument also resonates with the Casanova’s views on ‘dominated’ and ‘dominating’ languages and the entailing power play involved in the process of translation and linguistic exchange within such planes<sup>7</sup>. However, Ashour remains alert to the fact that language exchange in the case of Africa also involves the influence brought on English by the manipulation of the language exercised by African writers themselves. This includes, for instance her discussion of the works by Amos Tutuola, in which many of the conventions of the English grammar and idiom are broken. She makes such a statement while being aware that Tutuola’s unique experimentation with English could have been rather enabled by his limited years in formal education wherein he was not exposed to

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<sup>6</sup>Heilbron describes the hierarchy as such:

The international translation system is, first and foremost, a hierarchical structure, with central, semi-peripheral and peripheral languages. Using a simple definition of centrality, one can say that a language is more central in the world-system of translation when it has a larger share in the total number of translated books worldwide. The international figures available unambiguously indicate that English is by far the most central language in the international translation system. (433-434)

<sup>7</sup>Casanova describes both terms as follows:

Dominated languages have been recently nationalized (that is, have become national languages relatively recently), have little literary capital, little international recognition, a small number of national or international translators<sup>10</sup>, or are little known and have remained invisible for a long time in the great literary centres (for example Chinese and Japanese). Dominating languages have a great deal of literary capital due to their specific prestige, their age, and the number of texts which are considered universal and which are written in these languages. (4)

English professors and curricula long enough (147). As such, postcolonial concerns with influence and impact are combined in Ashour's work with socio-cultural views on language related to the notion of position in the international market of books, access to publishing, reception by critics, and most importantly readership.

Heilbron's and Cassanova's concepts on the central/ semi-peripheral/ and peripheral languages and dominated/ dominating languages, respectively, remind of the local/foreign dichotomy in the case of the post-independence West African novel with particular reference to the language and technique adopted by the writers. Chapter 8 of *At-Tabi' Yanhad* starts with a long quote from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* citing Prospero's cursing of Caliban after having used him to know about all the wealth of the island; the turning point is Caliban's use of the language he learnt from the master to curse the very same master back. By this analogy, Ashour re-establishes the link with the roots of oppression manifest in some key works of the English canon that dealt with the New World. This scene for Ashour captures the essence of interaction between the local and the foreign under colonial reality, which is paradoxical and problematic:

A well-acknowledged fact is that the indigenous inhabitant, represented by Caliban..., had his own language and accumulated body of knowledge and experience, namely his history and cultural heritage, that the intruder/ invader wanted to deny ... . However, it is also true that this indigenous inhabitant ... coercively, but later on voluntarily, acquired his master's language, which is the receptacle of this master's history and cultural heritage, as well. (140)

Hence, the dilemma that the African writer/ translator faces as a result of this postcolonial reality is represented through this historical trajectory. The situation is even made more complicated due to the existence of hundreds of local languages/ traditions that further contribute to the geographical divisions brought about by colonialism; and the issue of literacy and the fact that European languages seem to be the lingua franca of those who have been educated in missionary schools after all and influenced by the educational policies of the colonizer who neglected the development of local languages (Ashour 141). Being an Arabic speaker,

and a citizen of the Third World/ a former colony (Egypt), Ashour adds a nuanced perspective to this dilemma of language, which is missing from postcolonial analyses on the issue: namely, the complication of the situation of West African countries due to lack of a viable alternative shared language. She maintains that in the case of Egypt and Arab countries, for instance, who have been also subject to the colonial experience with different degrees of impact on the language spoken by the citizens, Arabic remains the prevalent medium of literary and cultural expression and a feasible alternative even in a country such as Algeria where the policy of cultural and linguistic integration by the French was extreme (142). Even if this situation does not give the author access to the international literary market, it still secures the writer a broad base of readership among a wide stretch of countries where Arabic is spoken. In Ashour's view, this is not a possibility in the case of the West African novel; the author/ translator will always have to grapple with questions of readership, access to publishing, and the reach of his/ her works.

Being a scholar influenced by the experience of liberation from colonization personally and given her academic leanings, Ashour goes beyond the diagnosis of the language scene and tries to explore potential venues that could achieve a breakthrough beyond the dominating/ dominated language dichotomy. Ashour is clearly aware of the importance of international recognition of the African novel, and of the privilege of writing in a 'dominant' European language (English or French) in terms of accessibility. However, she departs from this line of thought by shifting the concern from mere preoccupation with existence in the world literary market/ field through translation or authoring in a European language. Having acknowledged the wide distribution of literary works across the world when the work is produced in English or French, Ashour problematizes the use of English, French, or Portuguese by African writers or the translation of their works from local languages into any of the aforementioned languages. The perspective is switched in the case of Ashour: as Casanova considers oral languages such as "Yarouba, Gikuyu, Amharic" as "deprived of literary capital because they are lacking a writing system" and as languages that "cannot benefit from translation" (4), Ashour believes otherwise. Such languages to her do have their own rich heritage, but it is the historical situation that placed them in a position which forced such cultures and languages to wrestle to

come to terms with foreign languages and literary productions – necessarily more widespread and ‘dominant’ (140-41). In fact, Ashour was aware of the richness of African literature and the complexity of the relationship between African writers and local and metropolitan languages. She does not fall into the trap of considering literature only that is produced in western languages while relegating literature in hundreds of the local languages to anthropological endeavors, i.e. “an object for the ethnographer, rarely translated, or admitted to the ranks of world literatures” (Briault-Manus 48) – the concern voiced by a South African scholar in the volume *The Future of Postcolonial Studies* (2015). The centrality of the European languages and the fragmentation threatening the efforts of producing a coherent repertoire of novels (as well as poetry and drama) when writing in local languages are acknowledged. However, as early as the eighties, Ashour’s approach was to acknowledge in the same breath that this is not a dilemma in all cases and that the problem existed with much lesser degrees of severity in regions that spanned several countries sharing the same local language such as Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania, and Arabic speaking countries. Her decision to provide her insightful analysis in Arabic is in itself a choice that testifies to her belief that languages spoken in Africa could be a viable alternative for the author/ critic/ translator.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the fact that Ashour’s work on the issue of language and postcolonial writing/ translation has been tackled – though almost a decade after the publication of her book – by Translation Studies scholars (see for example *Translation and Empire* by Robin Douglas (1997) and the volume *Postcolonial Translation* edited by Bassnett and Trivedi (1999)), Ashour’s contribution lies in the fact that she was not focused on orienting herself towards the Anglo-American center. Ashour identified almost all of the issues and dilemmas that a postcolonial writer/ translator could face in Africa/ Third World and – in the postcolonial jargon of the nineties onwards – when coming from a minority culture (which acquires this status from political, social, and/ or economic marginalization or oppression). Nonetheless, the uniqueness of her intervention is that it is offered to an Arabic-speaking audience. Ashour’s book brought the concerns of fellow postcolonial subjects not accessible to Arabic speakers

to the audience whom she felt most needed involvement in this relevant argument. In writing in Arabic, she addressed also a dominated group with the concerns of their fellow Africans with the purpose of establishing affinities while suggesting new venues for interaction and research. At the same time, having opted for taking Arabic-speaking subjects as her audience for whom she translated extracts of literature from neighboring communities and having decided that the translation is not an end in itself but rather a means for bringing the debate on postcolonial reality to the Arab context, Ashour did not worry about the conflict between the supremacy of the original over the target. She built a model where selection, summary, paraphrase, and explication combine to provide a complete work representative of a perspective on the links between the novel in West Africa and the socio-political reality influenced by the fact of colonization and imperial hegemony.

This work illustrates that beyond the question of visibility or invisibility of the translator; domestication and foreignization; instrumental or hermeneutic approaches, ideologically-oriented literary critics/ scholars could with the help of translation advance an authentic literary critical project in the receiving culture. It is also argued that the intertwining of translation and criticism scholarship helps create new synergies and broader contextualization of critical ideas. Indeed, Radwa Ashour's early interest in African and Afro-American literature and culture (in the 1970s and 1980s) as an academic and critic not only contributed to the introduction of works from both areas to the Arabic culture, but also aimed at situating the Arab cultural scene within the larger context of African and Third World literatures and cultures. This interest was not only scholarly, based on attraction to the novelty of the topic of African or Afro-American studies at the time; rather, it was ideological and situated in Ashour's vocation as a critic, writer, and academic. She was fascinated with the potential that writing in general could unleash and she was aware that writing and commitment are inseparable. In a testimony about her experience as a writer, Ashour says: "I write because I am committed and I want to win over others. (I am aware of the ideological element in what I write – it is always present in writing by any author, but I am conscious of its presence.)" ("My Experience with Writing" 175). Ashour saw herself as an Arab citizen and writer living the experience of decolonization and civil rights

movement while engaging with it academically through her doctoral thesis as she indicated in her first autobiography, *al-Rihla* (1987), and in her critical writing; but she also felt that this experience cannot be separated from the larger context of Third World writing. Ashour's interest in African literature culminated in writing this critical treatise on the novel in West Africa, *At-Tabi' Yanhad: Ar-Riwayah fi Gharb Afriqia* [The Follower Rises: The Novel in West Africa] (1980/2016). By writing in Arabic, she also decided to orient herself and her literary critical project towards the Arab reader while bringing to this reader/ scholar African literary and cultural products in order to establish affinities, introduce comparable views, and situate disparate works and experiences within the larger context of Third World cultural and literary writing. That is not to say that Ashour's attempt was homogenizing all such works written post critical times of independence and resistance to the colonizer or co-opted domestic rulers; on the contrary, her approach was geared towards establishing links among such works in order to confirm common grounds and shared interests among citizens of Africa and the Third World. Ashour's career as a novelist also conforms to her project as a literary critic; almost two decades after the publication of this treatise on the West African novel, she reflects on her project as a novelist, her interest in history, and her 'function' as a "national recorder" stating that "[t]he rise of the Arabic novel is unthinkable outside the context of the struggle for national liberation and its pertinent questions of national history and identity" ("Eyewitness" 89). This claim echoes the opening statement of *At-Tabi' Yanhad* where she maintains that this study was motivated by the resemblance between the daily concerns of the Arab reader and the problems addressed by the African novelists "be they political issues arising from the colonial reality and emerging from this period of **national liberation**, or issues related to creativity and the position of the writer vis-à-vis his own cultural heritage and that of the European literary tradition that gave rise to the novel as a form..." (*At-Tabi' Yanhad* 7; my emphasis). The question of historicizing 'national liberation' and capturing the successes and failures of the peoples' endeavors was, therefore, one of the crosscutting concerns. In turn, Ashour's approach to translation, the decisions made in the process and concerning selections of extracts, and the weaving of translation and critical views, contributed new idiom to the receiving culture. The

translational interventionist strategies introduced in the book, ultimately, helped Ashour create synergies between concerns of Arabs and Africans that are still relevant today.

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