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## **The Contribution of Arabic Literature to World Literature:**

**Radwa Ashour's *Siraaj* a Case in Point**

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### **Why world literature?**

Radwa Ashour identifies herself as an Arab woman and a Third World citizen (“My Experience with writing” 170). Throughout her career she has also consciously referred to her upbringing in the Cairo of the fifties and the sixties and her early schooling in a French school where teachers and students were predominantly French, and made her and her other Egyptian classmates feel inferior (“*Tajrubati fil Kitaba*” 121). She is also a graduate and later a scholar/academic of English literature, in addition to the fact that she earned her PhD from the University of Massachusetts in the USA. This biographical snapshot is not meant introduce Ashour. It is rather meant to give a brief idea of the rich experience she had and to reflect on Ashour’s existence –by virtue of her background, historical moment, education, and choice – between the Arabic speaking world and the English speaking world in various capacities. Given her makeup as a person, academic and writer, and based on personal choices, Ashour was also an ‘oppositional’ and ‘worldly’ intellectual in the Saidian sense of the term. According to Edward Said, the critic/ criticism is “worldly and in the world so long as it opposes monocentrism, a concept ...[Said] understand[s] as working in conjunction with ethnocentrism, which licenses a

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culture to cloak itself in the particular authority of certain values over others” (53). This was part of the larger endeavor of Radwa Ashour. The themes of her writings – fiction and non-fiction – reflect this deep consciousness of the questions relevant to her own society, but are expressive of universal values as well [1]. Thus, this paper argues that Ashour’s works are not only a milestone in Egyptian literature but are also part of the world literature tradition.

In dealing with world literature, this paper does not aim to provide a full review of the theorization of the idea since the introduction of the term *Weltliteratur* in Europe by Goethe in his letter to his disciple Johann Eckermann in 1827 (Goethe 132) up to its modern mode of practice [2]. However, it highlights points raised by world literature practitioners and critics that are relevant to the reading of Ashour’s novel *Siraaj* both in the original and in translation as a work within this tradition. Prior to proceeding any further in the discussion, a pertinent question should be posed: whose world are we talking about? Isn’t Ashour’s work already produced in a world of its own, with a tradition, renowned writers, readership, and even production and consumption mechanisms? The answer is yes. Nonetheless, due to the centrality of the English language nowadays, and the primacy of the European and North Atlantic academia, modern world literature discussions have English language and the academia of the English speaking world as points of reference. Hence, Ashour’s work and its translation are discussed in this context. Because of the lengthy debates related to the defining nature of world literature, the paper adopts the view that world literature is an approach to reading texts. In response to what type of texts, Walkowitz and Damrosch are cited. Walkowitz argues that new world

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literature is regarded as “literature that circulates outside the geographic region in which it was produced – it is often assumed that texts are being translated into English” (“Unimaginable Largeness” 216). This claim of the centrality of translation is also augmented by Damrosch in more than one occasion, where he maintains that “[a] defining feature of world literature, then, is that it consists of works that thrive in translation” (“Frames for world literature” (497). Since translation has such a strong presence in the discussions of world literature, major concerns include conditions informing, governing, and influencing this circulation of literature in translation. Some world literature scholars argued that this whole process is governed materially by production, reception, and circulation [3]. Crosscutting is also the matter of translation both as a product and a process [4] and in terms of institutions enabling, commissioning, awarding, publishing, and circulating works in translation. However, in order not to get caught in the intricacies of the complex discussions on world literature, the paper offers a synthesis of the views made on the issue by scholars of North Atlantic and European academia where *Siraaj\**, Ashour, and Barbara Romaine are seen to fit.

Caroline Levine and Venkat Mani introducing volume 74 of *Modern Language Quarterly*, a special issue dedicated to the discussion of ‘world literature’ provide a bird’s eye view of the evolution of the discipline/ field/ practice. They reflect on the bumpy road world literature had to travel and the various facets it took. They conclude their article by maintaining that “World literature as a publishing and teaching project was part of a push to democratize high

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culture in the early twentieth century” and as such “This special issue suggests that it is time to rethink and recapture the power of this democratizing strand of world literature” (147). These two statements capture the claim of this article. The sophisticated discussions on the viability of world literature, the position of translation within this larger endeavor, and the historical evolution of world literature, if anything, prove that a discussion of world literature is still relevant, and that it is even the more so because it offers an opportunity for the discussion of works in translation, which helps ‘democratize’ the monopoly that high culture would have otherwise had over significant academic contexts and dominant (English-speaking) cultures of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. For the purposes of this article also Spivak’s view on world literature in a discussion held with her and Damrosch states that when world literature is addressed in the academic world, it “is not how to situate the peaks of the literary production of the world on a level playing field but to ask what makes literary cases singular. The singular is the always universalizable, never the universal. The site of reading is to make the singular visible in its ability” (466). This also applies to the novel *Siraaaj* which is indeed a singular novel in its defense of human dignity and hence it could be seen to promote universal values extending beyond historical and geographical reality. This paper also does not engage in the classifications of world literature works as high/low, major/ minor, produced by center/ produced by periphery. World literature is perceived in spatial and temporal terms: it is spatial in the sense that it is literature produced, translated, and read in a particular geographical location, in certain academic settings, or by particular readers. It is temporal in the sense that this literature does not exist in void, it belongs to a given moment

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in history upon its production and the work itself has its own history and timeframe; but at the same time its reading at a particular point in time makes the work of art close or distant to the hearts of the reader accordingly.

World literature is relevant as it democratizes reception and receiving cultures with respect to admission of literatures from around the world and it is also important because it tries to identify what makes the ‘singular’ and the local ingenuity ‘universal’. Therefore, it cannot be understood only in material terms.

Goethe’s distinction between two different senses of the world cautions us from hastily obscuring the normative dimension of worldhood by conflating worldliness with global circulation. The world in the higher sense is spiritual intercourse, transaction, and exchange aimed at bringing out universal humanity. This is its normative force. The world is thus a form of relating, belonging, or being-with. In contradistinction, the globe is a bounded object in Mercatorian space. We commonly say “map of the world,” when we really mean “map of the globe.” This distinction between global connectedness through the spatial diffusion and extensiveness achieved through media and market processes and belonging to a shared world corresponds to the fundamental contradiction between globalization and cosmopolitanism: although globalization creates the material conditions for a community of the greatest extension

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possible, capitalism radically undermines the achievement of a genuinely human world. The globe is not a world. This is a necessary premise if the cosmopolitan vocation of world literature can be meaningful today (emphasis added). (Cheah 318-19)

Thus, a third feature that could be distinguished in world literature is that by virtue of its name it is an endeavor seeking to read and engage with ‘universal humanity’. Inclusion or success of a work of literature to be read as world literature does not lie in material gain only or number of sales. This is the business of globalization, and in that sense world literature should not be globalized. World literature is not about power relations in the crude form represented by globalization; for academics and informed readers at least, it is an attempt at engaging with works and writers to enhance interaction above the level of material transactions and considerations. This ‘spiritual intercourse’ happens because world literature offers the opportunity of accessing the ‘stories’ from various regions that comprise the ‘narrative structure’ of the world as indicated by Cheah using Hannah Arendt’s terms (325).

The world therefore has a narrative structure. It is formed by the telling of stories. The objective world marks the term of a particular finite life by the quantitative measurement of its temporal length. But because it is devoid of meaning, it cannot impart any significance to the lives it delimits. For a human life to be preserved and remembered by posterity for its achievements, the individual’s coming and departing need to be given significance as a

unique birth and death, a beginning and ending of a life that has meaning for others. By giving meaning to intersubjective relations, speech elevates the objective world into a genuinely human world. It enables us to transcend our finitude, to escape the indistinction of merely biological life. (Cheah 325)

This statement echoes the trigger Radwa Ashour had cited early in her career that drives her to write “I also write because I have a fear of lurking death. What I mean is not just the sense of death at the end of it all, but death in its many different guises, in every nook and cranny, in the street, in the house, at school. I am talking about the live burial and assassination of potential” (“My experience with writing” 170). Thus, the formulation of the ‘narrative’ in itself defies the threat of loss of ‘life’ posed by the finite nature of time/ the world and that of decay and oblivion, which is the fate of the material world. Writing preserves human life and promises the fulfillment of human potential, regardless the materiality involved in the process. World literature achieves its relevance because it enables continuity of the larger human narrative that defeats the constraints of physical mortality.

### *Siraaaj*

*Siraaaj* (1992) is one of the mid-career novels written by Radwa Ashour (1946-2014). It followed a couple of critical studies, first autobiography, two novels, and a collection of short stories. Set in an imaginary island off the coast of East Africa, and in the nineteenth century as shall be implied later, it interlaces momentous historical times and figures of Egypt with the private history of that island, both sharing the burden of colonial pressure.

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In more than one occasion, Ashour dwells on the motivations driving her to write. In her talks she also reveals that she is not concerned with writing per se, but with quality writing that gives voice, and that outlives the writer. “I also write because I have a fear of lurking death” (Ashour, “My Experience as a Writer” 170). Thus, one reason for writing is to defy the voicelessness imposed by the choice not to write, and the stifling of one’s own version of life with all its complexities. However, to Ashour writing is also a means of resistance; “I write in self defense and defense of countless others with whom I identify or who are like me. I want to write because reality fills me with a sense of alienation” (Ashour 170). She has an astute awareness of her potentially vulnerable position both as a woman and as a citizen from the Third World, which informed her decision to take up writing – rather than sufficing by being only an academic, albeit a very inspiring and competent one.

In *Siraaj*, Radwa Ashour is preoccupied with concerns very relevant to the reality of history and politics in the Arab/Third world. Although theories of art as representation of reality have been superseded by many other formulations about the nature and function of literature, one could say that the novella with its fictional setting and characters are representative of historic realities and are a projection of current conditions. It is also the fictional correlative of historic narratives of struggle by the oppressed for a dignified life. The omniscient narrator’s voice acts as the voice of the recorder of this cross-section of the history of an imaginary island off the coast of East Africa. Exact dates are not given, but the reader is able to deduce the historical era involved by references to well known figures such as Queen

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Victoria, the British expansionist endeavors, and more accurately Orabi's resistance to the British invasion of Egypt. There are also cultural nuances that give a clue about the time in which the novella is set, such as the socio-economic structure on the Island, where slaves are kept to work in plantations, and where a large community of rather poor workers undertakes all the service and menial jobs, such as cooking, fishing, and the like.

Despite the centrality of the protagonist Said and his mother Amina, the key concern is the struggle against oppression, which manifests itself early on in the text through the subplot recounting Said's sojourn in Egypt. Said is a seafarer, and the son of a deceased adept pearl catcher and a baker in the Sultan's castle, Amina, the leading woman figure in the novella. As a teenager he sets out on a sea voyage with one of the ships sailing out of the island. However, he gets abandoned in the port city of Alexandria, Egypt. As a result, Said comes into contact with two formative influences during his stay in Egypt: first, he is helped by Mahmoud, a fifteen year old and is embraced by his family. The friendship was not destined to last, as the city is caught in the battle with the British. Mahmoud, in a moment – may be of uncalculated – intoxication throws himself in the heart of it and flies to one of the fortresses overlooking the sea to be part of action, and ultimately meets his death, much to Said's chagrin. Said drifted with the flow of Alexandrians fleeing the shelling and chaos, only to meet the second source of influence on him, during his journey away from home, the farmer Abu Ibrahim. Abu Ibrahim is a villager who decided to dedicate all of his family's wealth (a buffalo and a mule) to the war effort and to join Orabi's ranks. He decides to

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send Said to safety to stay with his family in the village. He returns after Orabi is defeated, which is rather sensed from his newly acquired subdued nature, very disturbing to his children and wife – but is a state out of which he snaps only when he hears his children singing a ditty deriding Admiral Beauchamp Seymour who was in command of the fleet of the Royal Navy bombarding Alexandria. Despite not being directly involved in action, and despite refusing to believe that he lost his friend Mahmoud to death, Said internalized the potential of resistance – even though it was aborted. In the article titled “Eyewitness, Scribe, and Storyteller”, Ashour dwells on the question of the position of history in her writing, and speaking of her later central novel *Granada*, Ashour she says, “But the novel is not an allegory. The setting is not a wrapping, I do not use the past as an allegorical substitute for the present. I also do not write about history for history's sake”, indeed she writes to “to connect past and present by means of a metaphorical image of loss and resistance” (91). This is what she does on a smaller scale in *Siraaj*.

Hafez, Said’s childhood friend, is also engaged in resistance clandestinely. He does so on the personal level by violating one of the cardinal rules of the Sultanate, namely communicating with the slaves. However, as the events unfold, it becomes clear that together with the slaves, the islanders – outside of the circle of the Sultan – are planning to overthrow the ruler. Hafez is also a truly free spirit. He would not accept the injustice imposed by authorities above him – an attitude which ultimately puts him in harm’s way. Hafez was more aggressive and eager to effect change and to defend a fellow fisherman. As a result of his audacity in defying the captain of the ship who wanted to force the sick

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man to work and who whipped Hafez, imprisonment in the dungeon was the fate he had to confront. Hafez pushed the reluctant Said into participating in the plotting and executing of action against the Sultan and his notorious brutality: “He would reap a crop of heads as if they were stalks of corn at harvest time” (Ashour 71) if people rose against him. But Hafez was nonetheless “unyielding” and hopeful that “we might succeed” (Ashour 71).

The youth in the novel are represented as agents of potential change/ resistance. If Hafez and Said due to their upbringing and makeup get engaged in outright opposition to the rule of the tyrannical Sultan, Mohammad, the Sultan’s son, is also depicted as a proponent of some elements of ‘reform’ to his father’s government. On two occasions Mohammad is presented offering an alternative view to the ways of his ancestors. Early on in the narrative, an excerpt from a letter sent by Mohammad is read by the father. During the time Mohammad spent in London to study, he observes – upon the behest of his father – everything around him in society and accordingly reports his observations in correspondences. In this letter he refers twice to forms and manifestations for protest by workers if they clash with their employers and women who throng before parliament to demonstrate for their right to vote (Ashour 9). Thus, this is an allusion to fundamental freedoms, which the son selected out of so many details he could have recounted. The second occasion is more confrontational. After the son’s return, and much to his father’s dismay, he had taken up western style of clothing and even more provokingly a western wife. Not only has he changed appearance and entered into an unacceptable marriage, but he trespassed by suggesting a democratic

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alternative to his father's despotic rule: "I suggest we set up a consultative council, and executive ministries, that we separate the state treasuries from your private ones; that we emancipate the slave and have them work for wages..." (Ashour 56). Before finishing his proposal, Mohammad's life was completely overturned; he was imprisoned in the dungeon and his wife deported. The son was a threat of another type; the Sultan was warned about the possibility of a mutiny by the slaves and he also instinctively understood that the British are another source of threat with their expansionist and colonial desires. The Sultan was indeed stunned by this new turn, where knowledge of a better alternative to the current form of governance is proposed. He could not even bring himself to listen to the argument. He felt 'betrayed'. Interestingly enough, early in the novel the Sultan's reaction upon reading his son's admiration of the manner in which the English conducted their lives, was to conjure up a mental image of his father who was forced by the English to abandon slave trade (Ashour 10). But at the same time he recalled his father's (Sultan Khaled) advice about the best way to deal with slaves on his island. Though he enjoined him to be benevolent and generous towards them, the concluding statement delivered from father to son was: "Trust no one, my son: beware of all, but be especially wary of the slaves, for it is in their nature to be treacherous – they are a filthy lot, who have inherited from Satan the sine of pride, and God punished them by making them slaves" (Ashour 11). So far the tension is mental and hypothetical. Tolerance of protests and opposition is on paper and faraway lands and is only an incident recounted in a letter, thus evoking only the advice and the warning passed down from father to son. However, when the threat is imminent and embodied in the figure of the son, a foreign wife, and an

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expected half-foreign grandson/daughter, the response is much more violent, decisive and final – imprisonment in the dungeon and deportation of the foreigner. Nothing but utter subservience shall be accepted.

The plotting by Said and Hafez to support the slaves and Mohammad's reformist proposals are all examples of political/ economic resistance. However, Ashour weaves the idea into the fabric of the narrative indicating that the social, the political, the economic, and the cultural are all intertwined. Tawaddud, Said's and Hafez's childhood friend is a smart girl, also working in the kitchen of the high house together with Amina. However, she also has a burning desire to emerge out of her limitations, mainly doubled in her case: once because she is a woman, and twice because she is a poor young woman. "She had been in the habit of dreaming about traveling to faraway countries" (Ashour 34). Not only did she aspire to travel to be able to see what seamen see when they go on voyages, but she has even tried to be one of them by disguising herself as a boy, to be turned down by the ship captain because she looked young. Tawaddud realizes that the world is much bigger and becomes more so when the horizons of learning are opened. She resists in her own way the restrictions imposed by virtue of the socio-economic condition of her class (her mother washed the clothes of the Judge's family). She comes into contact with learning when one day she overhears the Judge reading an allegorical story for his son. She listens with awe, and she decides to risk punishment to listen to more. Ultimately, after being caught once, she returns to steal one of the books she saw in the Judge's library only to cherish this book and keep it as a treasure. The reward Tawaddud seeks from

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learning/ reading is the sheer joy of learning. After having enjoyed a safe session of reading by the Judge to his son and leaving the house, “she began to leap about, dancing with delight and singing for joy. When she ran into Said and Hafez, she said she would make a small palm leaf basket for each of them” (Ashour 38).

Tawaddud’s persistence to learn and to explore potentially different experience – even if on the pages of a book – which leads her to risk severe punishment, is matched by another detail indicating defiance of random decisions, namely drinking coffee. Said brought back with him from Yemen a pack of coffee (2 pounds) and started to drink it in the evenings with his friend Hafez dismissing his mother’s fears as this drink was “forbidden” by the judge.

[The judge] said it was a novelty, that all novelty is error, and that all error is from the devil. He issued the proclamation to the island that coffee was forbidden by order of the Sultan, because it is of the same nature as wine – an intoxication and a poison that plays with the mind – and that anyone partaking of it was to be punished with one hundred lashes. (Ashour 50)

Said would not hear of it, and justified his insistence by the fact that everybody else around the world in similar places could drink it, in Egypt and Yemen at least, so how could it be sinful to drink it. The defiance by the two young men is juxtaposed with that of the slaves who surprisingly knew about coffee despite the strict isolation imposed on them by the Sultan.

The Sultan didn’t know that the slaves drank coffee, or that they cultivated the forbidden

trees behind a screen of carob and tamarind trees, whose huge trunks and dense shade shielded the coffee trees and protected them from infestations of locusts, as well as from burning sun and prying eyes. The Sultan didn't know that his slaves drank coffee and were preparing to depose him. Hafez had told Said about this, and he had listened uneasily, for what recourse did powerless slaves have against a sultan who lived in a fortress defended by armed guards? (71)

Thus, the story of resistance is woven. The free souls of young men and women muster enough courage inspiring them to take up their fate in their own hands. Defiance of the religio-political oppressive rhetoric is symbolic of the naive belief by the person in power that s/he can exercise full control on actions and even consciences. Insubordination starts in the social and personal spheres in preparation for engagement with the political sphere.

*Siraaj* also addresses a question that Ashour has raised in most of her works: the importance of recording life from the perspective of the ordinary man and woman. In the article quoted earlier in this paper, "My Experience with Writing" (1993), Ashour concludes this article by reiterating the assertion that death, the opposite of life, can be challenged only through writing. "I love writing and I love writing because life arrests me, astonishes me, embraces, confuses and frightens me, and because I am impassioned by it..." (175). The novel in and of itself is a fictional 'documentation' of the voices of the disenfranchised, Ashour herself admits this move on her part, when she states that

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some real historical events are referred to, but it is the life of the ordinary people that is made more prominent in the novel: “The 1882 bombing of Alexandria and the defeat of Orabi are distanced and pushed back to the background whereas the fictional revolt of the African slaves is brought to the foreground” (“Storyteller and Scribe” 90). It is as if Ashour offers a written record of resistance – even if not successfully leading to the aspired change.

Another dimension of this enchantment with writing, history, and resistance in *Siraa* is the duality of the oral versus the written and that of the ability to read and write versus illiteracy, and the power of the written document. The kind old slave Ammar and his stories is the attraction of Said, Hafez, Amina, and Tawaddud. His tales and legends are learnt by heart; when Said was hosted by Abu Ibrahim’s family, he would recount daily one of Ammar’s stories.

“The tale of the lion and the fox.” “The tale of the frog with two wives.” “The tale of the man who felt sorry for a snake pursued by a farmer, so he gave it refuge in his belly.” The children knew all of Ammar’s stories; likewise, they knew Ammar himself... (Ashour 23)

However, Ammar is the repository of oral stories only; therefore, when Tawaddud resorts to him as the second best alternative to the enchanting stories read by the Judge to his son, he could not be of help. His response was “But, Tawaddud, I know nothing of stories written in books!” (39), which she finds even more painful than the slap on the face she received from the Judge upon discovering her sneaking into his home. She cherishes learning so much as she was aware of the vistas that it could open to her.

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Literacy, writing and learning are depicted in the novel as dangerous skills only the monopoly of the elite, and mostly males: “There were no women on the entire island who could read, apart from the daughters of the Sultan” (Ashour 40). Thus, learning how to read is depicted as a privilege whose attainment was closer to a dream. Ammar, on the other hand, was also fixated on having Said ‘write’ him a letter to send via carrier pigeons to Ammar’s mother (Ashour 52); which is a detail that interlaces the power of love and communication with the power of writing. Ammar is aged and his mother is probably dead, and even if she were alive, she would have mostly been illiterate. Nonetheless, Ammar ultimately wants to ‘record’ his story with the sultans of this island and the deprivation he has experienced as a slave. The Sultan’s fear of the British is doubled by the fact that they compel him to provide them with a written ‘document’ indicating his full submission to their power. “He knew as he was signing the document that he was like the fool who opens his door to a stranger and invites him into his home, but there was no recourse open to him” (Ashour 11). The power of the written word is again invoked in the secret written messages exchanged between the workers and the slaves on the island in preparation for storming the high house and the dungeon. Thus, it is with this acute sense of awareness of the importance of ‘documenting’ and writing the ‘story’ of her people that Ashour writes her novels. Central to her endeavor is “to attempt to give history visibility and coherence, to conjure up unaccounted for, marginalized and silenced areas of the past and the present...” (“Storyteller and Scribe” 89).

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### **Translation in/and world literature**

If we dismiss the argument that world literature is merely about literature that manages to cross national boundaries to enter the circles of North Atlantic and European literary markets/ academia, and hence do not give primacy to physical and economic factors and terms of production and consumption to the favor of a more humanistic approach to world literature, this humanistic endeavor would apply also to efforts of translating works worthy of being read as world literature. With this in mind, the argument is rather focused on the potential enabled by translation into English – the lingua franca of the world – to have a novel, with such universal values as *Siraaaj* made accessible to a wider readership both in the academia and otherwise. Although, it would be difficult to embark on a quantitative analysis of the accessibility to the text by the lay reader, the fact that such texts are translated into English and made available for students and professors of literature through courses of ‘world literature’ and ‘comparative literature’ gives the literary work more currency. Indeed, through translation, Arabic works enter the realm of what is known in the academia as ‘world literature.’ They gain popularity and readership – at least academically. Writings on world literature have addressed the issue of literature in translation producing two key arguments: the first is in favor of translating literature and the other believes that this is an unfeasible task. David Damrosch is aware of the difficulty of producing works in translation. He even demonstrates this realization:

Yet translation has long had a bad reputation. How can any translation convey a novelist’s nuances of meaning or a poet’s delicate verbal music? *Traduttore traditore*, as an old adage

goes, slyly illustrating its point by its own untranslatability – “Translators are betrayers” may convey the general sense, but the English paraphrase loses the pithy playfulness of the Italian original. (*How to read world literature* 65)

He is a supporter of the view that literature “gains” in translation. Moreover, he argues that the “translatability” of a work of literature is not particularly linked to its value: “A work can hold a prominent place within its own culture but read poorly elsewhere, either because its language doesn’t translate well or because its cultural assumptions don’t travel” (*What is World Literature?* 289). Damrosch accordingly claims that “[l]iterary language is thus language that either gains *or* loses in translation ... literature stays within its national or regional tradition when it usually loses in translation, whereas works become world literature when they gain on balance in translation, stylistic losses offset by an expansion in depth as they increase their range...” (*What is World Literature?* 289). This view accepts sacrifices made on the word and phrase level, but acknowledges that the universality of ideas comprised in the work and the skill of the translator to interpret and render linguistic difficulties in a coherent manner would compensate for such a linguistic loss. Proponents of the second view maintain that literature is almost impossible to translate. Nicholas Harrison, on the other hand, argues, in his article “World Literature: What gets Lost in Translation”, that if as literature readers and scholars we believe that words are the building blocks of any given literary text and that unlike historical accounts, for instance, one cannot ‘paraphrase’ a passage from a novel or

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a poem, without losing the gist, then translation which essentially involves interpretation and paraphrase, does not offer a viable alternative for reading the text in the original.

Prior to any specificities of form and beauties of language, in other words, is a fundamental convention governing “reading as literature”, that means that not just in poetry but in literature in general, every word matters, in all its possible facets. Herein lies another way of explaining why the task of the literary translator is not just difficult but in some meaningful sense impossible. (418)

The two views expressed on translation of literature share this acknowledgement of the difficulty of transferring literary words and notions from one language into the other. However, it could be said that even if some sacrifices are made in the process on the linguistic level, the interaction that is achieved by making the work accessible to a wider readership would counterbalance this loss.

The scope of the discussion on ‘gain’ and ‘loss’ in translation is also extended by translation studies scholars. As world literature scholars focus more on the processes employed to overcome the problems of loss on the linguistic level that could mar the meaning, they propose that the translator needs to abide by translation ‘norms’ that regulate the production and reception of translation. Therefore the viability of translation as an activity that enables communication between two cultures is discussed by some scholars from the perspective of norms. The translation studies scholar Andrew Chesterman discussed the meaning of norms and their relevance to translation. If literature is

received in translation, part of the process of its acceptance and circulation within the receptor culture would be linked to the conformity of this translation to the prevalent norms within the receiving culture governing translations. These norms are important because they constitute the ‘expectancy’ of readers – including the person/ institution – commissioning the translation.

Expectancy norms are primarily validated in terms of their very existence in the target language community: people do have these expectations about certain kinds of texts, and therefore the norms embodied in these expectations are de facto valid. But in some situations these norms are also validated by a norm authority of some kind, such as a teacher, an examiner, a literary critic reviewing a translation, a translation critic, a publisher's reader, and so on. Within any society, there is usually a subset of members ("experts") who are believed by the rest of the society to have the competence to validate such norms. This authority validation may do no more than confirm a norm that is already acknowledged to exist in the society at large: in this sense, the norm-authorities genuinely "represent" the rest of the society and are presumably trusted by the other members to do so. (66)

This view of norms is particularly relevant to world literature and the discussion of translation within its context. The conformity of translations to ‘expected’ and/ or ‘accepted’ norms could balance the losses arising from linguistic difficulties. Such norms include, for instance strategies and

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techniques employed by the translator to make the translation accessible to the reader without stripping the original text from its uniqueness. In his article “Translation as Institution”, Theo Hermans similarly argues that translation is not an activity exercised in vacuum; on the contrary, it gains its status as a ‘legitimate’ translation by being produced and consumed within a larger context of translational norms that govern how all stakeholders involved “ought” to behave. “[T]he translator enters an existing network of discourses and social relations. His or her translational discourse occupies a place in, or at least in relation to, that network. It is part of the ambivalence of the translated text that it is expected to comply with both the translational *and* textual norms regarded as pertinent by a given community in a given domain” (Hermans 9). One of the norms that ‘traditional’ translations are fated to comply with is “forbid[ding] a radical transformation of the original text” (Hermans 14) while at the same time undertaking some degree of domestication to enable the reception of the translation in the target language. Therefore,

Translation has to live with contradictory impulses ... . While translated texts are intended to slot into new contexts, this relocation tends to be only partial because the true interpreter’s norm of non-interference sets a limit to the degree of integration. Hence the well-known observation that translated texts usually do not fit their new environment, their new space, as snugly and naturally as fully home-grown, non-translated texts. (Hermans 15)

In this article Hermans raises two points that are relevant to the discussion of incorporation of literary works into world

literature: the fact that translations (if not openly oppositional, activist, or experimental) after all comply with a larger set of norms governing both the process and the product, and they do so to gain the required legitimacy (by the receptor and commissioning institutions), on the one hand. On the other hand, translated works will not be accommodated within the receiving culture without being contested due to the limitations inherent in the process and the product of translation. This sentiment acknowledges simultaneously the possibilities and the limitations of translation: translation as a practice, process, and product are governed by norms according to which translators, translations, and readers operate. The fact that these works are translations could affect their reception and stir a feeling of suspicion towards the translated work. However, this questioning in itself is part of the ‘norms’ of reception of translation. It could also act as a trigger for further investigation on the part of the reader for information not fully domesticated to make the work sound and feel very familiar. Moreover, the discussion of norms does not necessarily deny the ‘interpretive’ role of the translator, as will be discussed; the existence of ‘norms’ rather means that there is a framework that guides the process to provide a minimum degree of ‘readability’ that makes a foreign work accessible in the receiving culture.

Besides the discussion of the role that norms play in leveling translation loss, translation studies scholars maintain that the success of translating literature lies in the ability of the translation/ translator to make engaging interpretations of the original. Venuti even argues, in “Translation Studies and World Literature” (2012), for the impossibility of examining

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world literature separately from translation studies. “World literature cannot be conceptualized apart from translation. In most historical periods as well as in most geographical areas, only a small minority of readers can comprehend more than one or two languages, so that, considered from the reader’s point of view, world literature consists not so much of original compositions as of translations...” (193). It is, therefore, a practical impossibility to envisage world literature without accepting works in translation. However, Venuti also problematizes the statement: according to him, translation is not just a means of providing access to world literature in English. The activity involves also the transfer of forms and cultural exchange. In fact, he proposes that translations are not exact replicas of the source but rather engage the receiving culture while introducing the sending culture. “Translation increases the heterogeneity because the translator’s verbal choices amount to interpretive moves that vary the source text. The variations may be determined not simply by the receiving language and culture but also by a reading of the source text that incorporates knowledge of the source culture as well” (Venuti 195). Thus, the value of translated works is not related to whether a translation fits in the larger framework of literary production in the receiving culture, but in the exchange involved on one level between source and target texts as interpreted by the translator and the conversation established between a given text and its reader approaching the text as world literature: “The great conversation of world literature takes place on two very different levels: among authors who know and react to one another’s work, and in the mind of the reader, where works meet and interact in ways that may have little to do with cultural and historical proximity” (Damrosch, *What is World Literature* 298). One could add even the conversation in the

mind of the translator who carries the responsibility of rendering and interpreting a text for the reader who would rely – at times – completely on the translator for a version of the literary text.

Barbara Romaine reflects on the interpretive role of the translator. In an experiment she conducted on graduate students on the issue of interpretation in translation, she starts with the assumption that readers themselves would not agree on the interpretation of any original text in prose or verse. Based on this assumption she draws the analogy with translators: “if even readers all reading in a common language cannot fully agree about what a given text means, then what hope can there possibly be for any kind of accuracy in literary translation?” The answer is neither a decisive assertion nor negation. It is more of a compromise:

If we accept, *a priori*, that perfect accuracy is an unattainable goal in translating a literary text from one language to another, if for no other reason than that every language contains expressions whose exact equivalent may not exist in any other language, then we can turn our attention to the more important question of how to produce a translation that is ... as faithful as possible to the spirit of the original. (Romaine, “On writing in Tongues” 16).

Brian Nelson also contemplates this question of relaying the ‘spirit’ of the original, producing in the process a creative text that is not a slavish copy of the source nor a bland version stripped of all the complexities for the benefit of the readers of the translation.

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A crucial issue is how the translator is to convey the spirit, texture and general idiom of a text in a different culture. What is often required is a form of creative imitation rather than a translation in the strict, formal sense of the term. Although, plainly, a translation cannot exist without the original, and is in that sense dependent on it, the translator must sometimes take considerable liberties in order to transmit the spirit of the original, sometimes to such an extent that we can say that a given translation assumes a considerable degree of independence from the original text. (Nelson 362)

In spite of the reservations expressed by some scholars towards translated works on grounds of infidelity and even inability to be as true to the original, the views of world literature and translation studies scholars could be synthesized to make an argument for the viability of translating literary works. Norms govern the process of translation; such norms include interpretive techniques that enable the production of a translation that is close to the original 'in spirit'. The interpretive powers of the translator are not subversive, on the contrary, they help in the creation of a new text which enters in conversation with other texts in the mind of readers and researchers.

### **Validation of world literature works**

It is true that the view of world literature synthesized and presented in this article does not foreground the material aspects in the 'production' of texts read as world literature,

particularly through translation; namely commissioning, publishing, distributing, publicizing and so on. It is rather focused on the inherent nature of texts and the approaches to translation that would be important to note if a text is to be read in the tradition of world literature. Nonetheless, the case of Barbara Romaine and *Siraaj* call to the attention the material circumstances for the production of this work in translation, and the boost that such circumstances could have given to have this text approached and read as part of the world literary tradition, which is presented in this paper “*not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading, a detached engagement with a world beyond our own*” (Damrosch, *What is World Literature* 297). Romaine was nominated (2011) for the prize of the London-based magazine *Banipal* for her translation of another work by Radwa Ashour – *Specters*. According to Roger Allen, this prize together with a few others awarded for Arabic literature in translation act as a “stimulus to discussion of translation criteria and responsibilities” (Allen 474), which echoes the process of normalization of translation works stated earlier by Chesterman. But not only that, the Banipal Trust itself underscores the interaction it could enable between works in Arabic and world literature:

The Trust seeks to support and promote the translation of literary works by contemporary Arab authors into English. Arab literature is an essential part of world culture and human civilisation, and it is through literary translation that these works of contemporary Arab literature become accessible to the widest possible audience, can take their rightful place within world literature and speak for

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themselves to a global readership.  
(<http://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/mission/>  
n.page.)

This is part of the mission statement posted on the Banipal Trust for Arabic Literature (established in 2004), which founds the support provided to translation of Arabic literature into English on two main assumptions: the fact that Arab literature is inseparable from the larger human civilization, nonetheless, the main obstacle to its full fledged interaction and accessibility is the language barrier, on the one hand. On the other hand, the mechanism that enhances this accessibility is translation. The final statement made echoes the claims made by Damrosch in his seminal work *What is World Literature* (2003), in the sense that it acknowledges the existence of such a field/practice called world literature – which even in the case of Banipal extends beyond the walls of the academia – and that translation helps translated texts “speak for themselves”, despite the fact that this notion could be challenged given the existence of a mediator, the translator.

The choice of the text by the translator, the venue that would be willing to publish the translation (i.e. all dynamics of the publishing industry streamline or marginal and the acknowledgement by wards and prizes), and the distribution (i.e. consumption in the academia or by the lay reader) are all important issues to be factored in. *Siraaaj* is published by the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas, which features several activities including teaching, community outreach, and publishing. The Center is also the producer of various series of publications, and this novel is part of the series titled The Modern Middle East Literatures

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in Translation, “which is devoted to the publication of significant works of fiction, criticism, and memoirs translated into English from Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, and Turkish” (The Center’s Website). This forum secured the publication of the novel that came to the attention of the Barbara Romaine by chance on a visit she paid to the book store during her stay as a student of Arabic in Egypt. Also, according to the translator, she was able to reach the publisher through connections with the established translator, William Granara. After having worked on the translation of the book without being commissioned to do so officially: “Some six or seven years later, my friend and colleague Bill Granara published his translation of *Granada*, so I wrote to him and asked whether he could put me in touch with Radwa about another possible project. He did, I sent her a sample, and after she’d read it she agreed to go forward” (Romaine, “Interview with *Banipal*” n.page.). Thus, one could say that the translation and publication of this particular text were the outcome of coincidence rather than planned endeavors – when she had seen the book while browsing in the publisher’s bookstore in the nineties only to learn from the cover that Ashour “had gotten her doctorate at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, from which I graduated. It was too much serendipity—I had to buy the book” (Romaine, “Interview with *Banipal*” n.page.). However, the venue with its acknowledgment of the importance of translation from Arabic attests to opportunities facilitated by the academic publishing sector for engaging with texts from around the world depending on the nature of the program. “In this realm, there is clearly a greater openness to the unfamiliar and “foreign” than there is in the commercial sector,…” (Allen 483). Though no exact

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statistics on sales and reading of this novel could be established, the fact that Romaine was nominated for her translation of Ashour for the Banipal Prize and the publication of the novel by one of the leading academic forums in the field of Arabic literature, imply that the opportunities for wider dissemination of the novel are enhanced. Talking about the visibility of the novel, however, is by no means an approval of reducing the value of texts to their circulation along the lines of global transactions, at the risk of acknowledging that translated literature is doomed to cater for the tastes and structures of the receiving culture – with the consequence of homogenizing any cultural uniqueness. It is a statement meant to examine the supportive role that credible awards and academic centers could play in having a text read as world literature.

### **Close reading: Delving into the world of the literary text**

Many scholars addressing the issue of world literature deal with trends, translation, circulation, and experiential aspects about the text, rather than deal with the essential qualities of any given text or group of texts. As their treatises testify, they favor monitoring overall tendencies over close reading [5]. Nevertheless, recalling the understanding of world literature expressed early on in the article that favored the view of expressing universals through the local and the particular; and recalling the position of the paper regarding the ability of norms of translation to help compensate for the loss in translation, close reading becomes indispensable. Close reading is important because it “requires attention to literature’s force of signification, how it moves readers in singular experiences of reading that point to the opening of other worlds” (Cheah 316).

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This paper examines Radwa Ashour's *Siraaj* arguing that the text is indeed a text of the world. This assumption is justified by various reasons: Ashour's novel is steeped in particulars but at the same time it is timeless in the universality of the issues addressed. The translation could be seen as having ushered the novel into the realm of world literature by offering the novel in English, however, without stripping it of its soul due to loss and over-domestication (as world literature scholars have cautioned). Moreover, Barbra Romaine adopted an approach – as will be seen in the close reading of the translation – based on a combination of translation strategies that managed to strike a balance between simulating the original while offering a new product to the reader. The venue of publication and the acclaim accorded the translator through nomination to the Banipal prize also contribute to the worldliness of the work if measured by reception and consumption in North Atlantic and English-speaking European countries.

Romaine decides to start the book with a brief critical introduction, not dedicated to address her strategies used in translation, the challenges she encountered, or the reasons for selecting this particular novel. However, she discusses Radwa Ashour's choice of theme and tries to situate the theme within the larger framework of interests of the readers. "Arresting in itself as a feature of this modern Arab novel, the theme of slavery here also serves a particular purpose, inviting the readers, to interrogate the notion of bondage, and find a meaningful difference – if we can – between outright enslavement and life as a supposedly free agent under authoritarian rule" (Romaine, *Siraaj* xi). In addition to using the introduction to familiarize the reader with the

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forthcoming text, and establishing the rootedness of the novel in the Arab/ Egyptian culture, Romaine argues for the universality of the key theme. She also juxtaposes the notion of writing as a means of supporting memory against erosion and the potential use of writing to obliterate oral memory implied in the novel and explicitly argued in some of Ashour's critical writings, with a similar thought from Milan Kundera. In doing so, Romaine builds in the mind of the reader connections with non-Arab writing. This gesture could lead the reader to interact with this translation as a contribution to the novelistic tradition of the world, rather than perceive it as a foreign work of art. The novel is thus enclosed between this elegant critical introduction at the beginning and an equally slim section at the end providing a short glossary for terms (referring to items of clothing or some cultural features) and translations of proper nouns and chapter notes where she glosses Arabic cultural references that would be quite exotic for the foreign reader.

A close reading of Romaine's translation best illustrates the strategies she employed. However, prior to talking about her strategies it is pertinent to reflect on some of the difficulties that *Siraa* could have possibly posed for a translation – albeit the fact that this not the most linguistically/ culturally challenging of Ashour's texts. Due to Ashour's unequivocal fondness and mastery of the Arabic language and all elements involved in its makeup, language becomes so vibrant and alive in her texts. Thus, she shifts register to suit the historical setting; introduces idiomatic speech, particularly in the dialogue; embeds fables and legends in the narrative; and uses allusions to the Quran, poetry, and history. This analysis of the strategies employed by Romaine in translation will address her approach to such unique

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actions taken by Ashour vis-à-vis her story, bearing in mind that Romaine's choice of text was quite coincidental. Romaine, herself a student of Arabic and later a university instructor and a professional literary translator is aware of all such pitfalls and difficulties. She does not opt to homogenize the novel for the benefit of the foreign reader, but she keeps the exotic elements to a minimum to ensure a smooth reading of the text. She strikes a balance between the two key approaches to translation, 'domestication' and 'foreignization' where "domestication designates the type of translation in which a transparent, fluent style is adopted to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for target language readers, while foreignization means a target text is produced which deliberately breaks target conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original (Shuttleworth & Cowie 59). The paper does not intent to offer an inventory of the strategies employed by Romaine, nor does it attempt an evaluation of the choices made or the translation techniques employed. However, representative examples will be discussed to have a closer look at the actions taken by the translator to resolve some cultural complexities. For the translation of culture-bound expressions, Romaine employed one of five acknowledged techniques (Dweik and Suleiman 47-48): "cultural equivalent", "functional translation", "paraphrasing", "glossing", or "borrowing."

In her translation, Romaine is generally faithful to the structure and text organization of the Arabic, deviating mainly where glossing would be too cumbersome and unnecessary. She resorts to domestication when meaning could be communicated without damage to the fabric or

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spirit of the narrative. One of the clear instances of domestication is experienced early in the novel: the Sultan concludes a correspondence sent to his son (who went to study in Britain the land of the enemy) with a warning drawn from the collective legends – which takes various manifestations. In vivid detail, the Sultan tells the son that should he fail to comply with this advice, he would be doomed:

وإلا أضعت عقلك وانطمست فكرتك وصرت كأولئك البحارة في الحكاية القديمة الذين أكلوا من طعام المجوس فصاروا كالإبل لا يعلمون ما يفعل بهم يأكلون فيتسع جوفهم فيزيد لهم المجوس حتى يسمنون فيذبحونهم ويأكلونهم" (Ashour ١٧).

...your thoughts will be erased, and you'll become like those sailors of legend who ate of the **sorcerers'** food and became like **beasts** that know not what is done to them: the more they ate, the emptier they grew, while the sorcerers kept feeding them more and more so as to slaughter and devour them. (*Siraa* 8)

The image was domesticated by using the elements that are closer to legends of a European origin. Thus, the sailors are caught in the snarls of 'sorcerers' rather than Magians, which is the interpretation that would have come to the mind of the Arabic reader. Also, the animal to which the sailors are compared in Arabic is the camel, while in English it is only a 'beast', as the camel is mainly a stately animal in the Arabic culture both for feasting and transportation.

'Cultural equivalents' are particularly noted in proverbs whose gist is universal. The dilemma the Sultan feels, for instance, towards the British who decided to take interest in his island is contemplated in several monologues. In one of the earlier monologues, the Sultan feels that should he resort to the Germans (another super power at the time of the

novel) as a counter power could entail a difficult situation "إن لجأ إليهم يكون كالمستجير من الرمضاء بالنار" (Ashour 22) which is translated as "turning to them would be jumping out of the frying pan into the fire" (*Siraaj* 12). The strategy of 'functional translation' is resorted to where emotional cultural expressions are used; for instance when Um Ibrahim sees her husband cheerful after having been so withdrawn and morose for a long time since his return from the battle with Orabi, she says, "خير اللهم اجعله خير" (Ashour 43) which is an expression usually invoked at times of so much laughter and mirth to dispel any evil spirit that would jinx the moment. Romaine decided to interpret the situation on the very private level of the husband and wife and to take the statement as a wish expressed by the wife have her husband back, "Oh, God, make him well again" (*Siraaj* 26). Also, in another intimate encounter after a long period of absence, this time between Amina and Said after his return to the island, the mother uses a very familiar expression in Arabic indicating that separation breaks the person "هدني بعدك يا سعيد" (Ashour 67), which is translated by Romaine as, "It nearly killed me, having you so far away" (*Siraaj* 45) involving some explanation of the situation.

'Paraphrase' is one of the techniques that is extensively but prudently used by Romaine who either undertakes it within the text, when the explanation would not disturb the flow of narrative, or through glossing in the notes section, when there is a need for further extra-textual clarification, particularly when references are made to personalities from Arab history or legend. Paraphrase could also be required for a single word or for a cultural notion: for instance when Umm Latif was approached towards the end of the novel by

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Tawaddud to take the permission of the Sultan's wife for Amina to sleep in the kitchen, which would enable access to the palace pantry to bake bread for the rebels, she said "الحل الحل في يد الحلال" (Ashour 111). The word "الحلال", which is made in reference to God, however, could not be rendered in an equivalent word, and the translation was "The solution is in the hands of the One who solves all problems" (*Siraaj* 75). The use of 'glossing' augments the strategy of paraphrase. In the case of translating "بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم" as it appears in the opening scene, Romaine uses both the technique of borrowing "*Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*" (Ashour 1) and glossing as she explains in the Notes "this is an invocation frequently uttered at the start of a task or a daily event, such as a meal; it may also be used to dispel evil spirits, particularly at times of darkness or twilight" (*Siraaj* 85). However, when used by the character Ibrahim later in the novel, when he was startled upon seeing Said for the first time, a translated rendering is provided "in the name of God the merciful and compassionate" (*Siraaj* 20). As such, extra-textual paraphrase is encountered when the concept is too sophisticated to be explained within the text. Umm Ibrahim happy upon the return of her husband said, "لولا الملامة لزغردت" (Ashour 41), which Romaine translated, "If I wouldn't be scolded for it, I would trill for joy!" (*Siraaj* 25). This statement comprises two cultural concepts: the first part of the statement could be deployed in various contexts where the speaker usually means that s/he observes cultural and societal norms and hence justifies refraining from undertaking a certain action and it could be interpreted as "had it not been for the disapproval of society, I would have....". However, Romaine decides to render the word "الملامة" literally sacrificing the reference to the traditional shyness – usually experienced by women – from society's

blame. She decides, though, to explain in the notes the second part of the statement referring to ululation as an indication of a sound that is usually produced by moving the tongue between the cheeks as an expression of joy “high-pitched ululation often uttered by women on celebratory occasions” (*Siraaaj* 86). Another cultural reference which Romaine decided to translate literally and follow with a gloss, is the reference made to the beauty of one of the Sultan’s concubines as the “moon”, which if left foreignized could have been confusing. Thus, she explains that the “moon is a standard metaphor applied to a beauty or any object of infatuation in Arab thought and literature” (*Siraaaj* 87). Paraphrase in the notes section, obviously enables Romaine the freedom of opting for the economy of expression at the expense of absolute transparency to the reader. Thus, she deploys this approach throughout the entire work as towards the end of the novel she uses it in the case of a proverb said by one of the women in the Palace kitchen in response to Tawaddud’s proposal to have Amina sleep in the kitchen to be able to work two shifts. This proverb is usually used upon making a situation worse despite the original good intentions, “You’ll daub her eyes with kohl and blind her in the process”, with a gloss in the notes. However, when the foreign wife is brought by Mohammad, the Sultan’s son, to the court, she is described deridingly as “عنزة عجفاء” (Ashour 82) and Romaine decides to translate the image literally and describe the woman as “emaciated goat” (*Siraaaj* 55), without any further explanation. Romaine employs borrowing in eleven words only throughout the entire novel with explanation under “Terms” at the end of the novel (abaya, abu, ‘amm, bin, jilbab, mizmar, muezzin, riyal, rotl, sitt, and umm) (*Siraaaj* 83), some of which are

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familiar to the English speaker already. However, she decides to drop the term of familiar address “الولد” which means the young man/ little boy in reference to the character of Mahmoud, probably as it would have been cumbersome to translate in any form. The interplay between paraphrase, glossing, and borrowing reveals the balance that Romaine tried to strike between offering a text that does not put the reader to task and a text that engages the reader intellectually without being too demanding or boring due to the extreme exoticism. Rightly, one of Romaine’s reviewers commends the subtlety of the translators glossing, indicating that it is an admirable feature because it “retains the ... sweet sadness of the original Arabic. Appropriately for a university press publication, she is permitted the prerogative of a translator’s introduction and endnotes, which for their part are marked with such subtle superscripts that they scarcely draw attention to themselves. The culturally specific references flow easily within the text, never breaking the rhythm” (Wilmsen 192).

Perhaps one of the most difficult areas to convey through translation is the allusions to religion, history, culture and so on. They are the parts that invoke the notion of intertextuality defined by Munday and Hatim,

In the case of **vertical intertextuality**, conjuring up other texts ‘virtually’ in this way enables us to see a diverse range of linguistic/rhetorical devices ... as tokens of a type of textual occurrence. They are not necessarily concrete references to a text form we have actually encountered, but cues which conjure up images of other texts or **genres**. Our ability to recognize and catalogue such

features of language use builds on a contextual awareness we possess as a basis of the way entire **socio-textual practices** evolve. These practices, ..., are crucial, particularly when they vary, sometimes drastically, from one language to another. (88)

*Siraaaj* is laden with such allusions to the Muslim and Arab history and culture. However, two poignant references are made towards the end of the novel within the context of the rebellion on the Island. The first was a concern expressed by Said vis-à-vis his suspicion that a rebellion in collaboration with the slaves could be successful. Said believes that should the Sultan know of it “سيحصد الرؤوس كأنها عيدان الذرة وقت القطف” (Ashour 105), which was translated by Romaine translated as follows, “He would reap a crop of heads as if they were stalks of corn at harvest time” (*Siraaaj* 71). The statement in Arabic echoes the memory of al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi (661-714 AD), the bloody Umayyad governor, renowned in Muslim-Arab history for his statement to his opponents “I see heads that have matured and are ready for plucking” (“إني رأيت رؤوساً قد أئبعت وحن” (“قطفها”). The second statement is said by the narrator commenting on the abortion of the revolution at the end of the novel: “عدوهم أمامهم، وخلفهم بحرهم اليومي الأليف فكيف؟! العدو” “أمامهم يواجهونه ويقدرون، العدو وراءهم يقصف من بوارجه فتتساقط الأجساد وتتطفئ القناديل...” (118). Romaine translated the image, “Before them was their enemy, behind them their familiar everyday sea – so how could this be? The enemy before them they confronted, and they had the power; the enemy behind them bombarded them for its battleships, and bodies fell, lanterns went out...” (81). The allusion her is to the commander Tariq ibn Ziyad (670-720 AD), who led the Islamic

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Umayyad conquest of Visigothic Hispania in 711–718 A.D and gave a famous speech to his soldiers starting with the adage-like statement “أيها الناس! أيها الناس؛ أين المفر؟! والبحر من إلا الصدق والصبر” ورائكم والعدو أمامكم، فليس لكم والله! إلا الصدق والصبر". Both instances evoke the references to religio-historical events that the translation also fails to suggest.

Overall, nevertheless, when examined in light of Damrosch’s discussion of issues facing translation, Romaine managed to sail through the difficult task of rendering cultural references with the minimum degree of loss entailed.

How should the translation reflect the foreignness of the original, and how far should it adapt to the host-country’s literary norms? Too much foreignness can produce a text that will baffle or bore its new audience, while too much assimilation may lose the difference that made the work worth translating to begin with. These questions go beyond the issue of the accuracy of individual word choices. Translators have two fundamental decisions to make: first, they must decide for themselves what they believe to be the original work’s nature: its tone, level and mode of address, and its relation to the world around it. Having come to an understanding – really an interpretation – of the work’s meaning and force in its original setting, they must then develop strategies to convey the work’s qualities to a new audience, adjusting for the differences of language, time, place, and

audience expectations. (Damrosch, *How to read world literature* 75)

Barbara Romaine is both an academic and a professional literary translator. She is aware of the norms within whose bounds the exercise of translation lies. Despite the fact that she does not explain within the introduction to the novel or elsewhere the strategies she employs when translating the novel, the actual translation shows that she employed various strategies and techniques that mainly aimed at providing a text both fluent and faithful. The deliberate nature of involvement in the process cannot be denied, as in the interview given on her winning the Banipal prize, Romaine confirms that translation was not produced in isolation but through a process of consultation with the authors she translated: “Bahaa Taher very kindly and generously allowed me to cut my translator’s teeth, so to speak, on *Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery*; ...I have worked very closely with Radwa as well—on both novels, but especially on *Specters*, which, with its dual narrative, is more complex than *Siraaj*” (Romaine, “Interview with Banipal” n.page.). This collaboration indeed was rewarded as the translation produced an equally nuanced text that manages to earn the novel a position in the world literary tradition.

### **Conclusion**

Part of the debate on the relationship between world literature and translation is related to works written while authors are conscious of their translation immediately after or even simultaneously with their publication nationally. Such works would tone down the national and cultural

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specificities that would otherwise hinder their rendering into foreign languages causing the much lamented ‘loss.’

It is a commonplace that something is always “lost in translation.” The content of a work in one language cannot simply transfer to another language, and no serious translator working today would make that claim. But the point about so-called untranslatable works is that they are more resistant to translation because they focus their attention on one language in particular. They use proper names whose cultural and historical associations are not easily rendered in a new language. They generate metaphor through homonym, accent, and other vernacular effects. They comment on the relationship between one language and specific other languages, or between one dialect of a language and another. Or they attach ideas to phonological or etymological patterns. Books designed for translation relinquish most if not all of these qualities”. (Walkowitz, “Close Reading” 172-73).

Thus, within the discussion of texts approached as world literature, not only when they are translated but also in the original, it is important to distinguish between works that have been translated post factum and those written with the awareness that translations will be made simultaneously [7]. This awareness is relevant because it has impact on the construction of the work by the author. Radwa Ashour could be said to have been more conscious of her immediate environment first as a citizen of Egypt and then as a citizen from the ‘Third World’: “I am an Arab woman and a Third

World citizen” (Ashour, “My experience with writing” 170) who is worried about the ‘story’/ ‘narrative’ she will leave to posterity. The elements of her narrative are not foreign; on the contrary they are steeped in the local surroundings “they are a river and a palm tree, the tomb of an old kind harbouring a dream of the everlasting, the lives of thousands of slaves forced to build it, a university, a mosque, alleyways branching off around it and leading to tombs lived in by people, ... the voice of a woman singing and a rose”(Ashour, “My experience with writing” 171). The second formative element is Arabic language “in which I see a homeland whose limits range from the Qur’an of the Arabs to the call of the peddler, from the national anthem issuing from the mouths of children at school in the morning, to the speech of a hypocritical politician.” (“My experience with writing” 171). Thus, Ashour’s translated works are not “produced primarily for foreign consumption” (Damrosch, *What is world literature* 18). Ashour is mainly anchored in the constituents of her provincial and regional culture, but because she is also concerned with the finiteness of her life and of anything material; she could portray universal concerns despite the local guise of her stories.

Furthermore, Radwa Ashour’s work – and for that matter works – is not read as part of the world literary tradition because they have no audience at home or for fear of censorship and persecution, Radwa Ashour’s works have enjoyed public acclaim locally and regionally. Ashour has always been part of the larger literary movement of her generation and involved in the local literary events. Her works could befittingly be described as “locally inflected and translocally mobile, open for reading not only in themselves

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or for some abstract notion of canonical value, but furthermore (and differently) through the modes of resonance, contrapuntality, textual interconnection, and systemic inscription” (Cooppan 33). Thus, Ashour’s novel originating in the Egyptian/ Arabic culture and traveling to the English-speaking cultures through translation could be read as world literature not for a voyeuristic fascination with the oppressed status of women in Arab society or for denouncing her cultural heritage. Contrarily, they are so much so for Ashour’s ability to write literature for and about human beings.

### **Notes:**

\* References are made both to the Arabic original and the translation. Whenever reference is made to the Arabic version, the in text citation shall be “Ashour”, and it shall be *Siraaj* in the case of quoting from the translation.

[1] Radwa Ashour is preoccupied with the themes of freedom and liberation as expressed in her autobiographies *al-Rihla* (the Journey), *Athqal min Radwa* (Heavier than Radwa) and its unfinished posthumously published sequel *as-Sarkha* (The Scream). She is also concerned with the relationship between history and tradition and the modern world as explored in *Qita’ah min Uroppa* (Part of Europe). She explores the physical and psychological pain of imprisonment in *Blue Lorries*. Her memorable trilogy *Granda* stands as a culmination of all the humanistic themes she represents in her works.

[2] In the last decade anthologies and readers of world literature were produced including: *World Literature Reader: A Reader* published by Routledge, 2012, edited Theo d’Haen, César Domínguez, and Mads Rosendahl

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Thomsen, eds., and *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* also published by Routledge, 2011, edited by Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir.

[3] See Pascale Cassanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (2004) for the examination of the field of world literature based on the concept of 'market' and 'nation'; and Franco Moretti's article "World-systems Analysis, Evolutionary Theory, "weltiliteratur"". *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 28.3 (2005): 217–228, for a discussion of world literature as a system of its own.

[4] Writings by translators on the undertakings and projects of translation (Roger Allen, Denis Johnson Davies, Marilyn Booth and others) and writings by translation studies scholars on the connection between world literature and translation (see for instance Venuti, in the third edition of the *Translation Studies Reader* (2012), and Theo Hermans "Cross-cultural Translation Studies as Thick Translation". *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 66.3 (2003): 380–389.)

[5] Discussion of world literature and comparative literature also involves views on the relationship between the 'national' and local literature/ material/ form and world literature. It also deals with the issue of impact and influence, and the difficult question what constitutes and who decides that this literature is 'world' literature. On another level he discusses the balance between analysis based on close reading and that based on the evolution of certain literary forms, what he dubs as 'distant' versus 'close' reading. Franco Moretti addresses such issues and more in "Conjectures on world literature" published as early as 2000.

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[7] Although no value judgment is made in this regard on such texts. It is only a different approach compared to the situation of the translation of Ashour's works.

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