Literary Translation Tide in Modern Times: A Narrative Account

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Abstract

This study aims to offer a narrative reading of the massive flow of literary translations into Arabic in modern times. Using Mona Baker's narrativity theory, the analysis identifies three key strategies: selectivity, paratextuality and adaptivity. They are primarily used to explore the potential translatability of literary discourse both at the macro and micro levels. First, there are several reasons that fuel this literary tide, including reduced religious censorship, weakened literary self-sufficiency, fading interest in learning, pursuing novel forms of literary expressions, promoting colonial narratives, and profitability. Second, translators usually use their paratextual spaces to highlight key narratives in the source text, potentially promoting or challenging domestic narratives. Last, a wide range of linguistic adjustments are usually made to promote or resist certain narratives. From selection to adding commentaries and making textual adaptations, translators have to take different decisions to respect social norms, political redlines and religious sensitivities and ensure the readability of their productions.

Keywords: Translatability, narrativity, selectivity, adaptivity, paratextuality

After several decades of intellectual dormancy in the Arab intellectual and translation landscape, often called *inḥiṭāṭ*, there was renewed interest in translating scientific works and textbooks under Muḥammad ʻAlī (r. 1805-1848). This interest was short-lived, however, giving way to a massive flow of literary translations since the reign of Ismāʻīl (r. 1863-1879) until today. The period from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries saw an intellectual and cultural *Nahḍa* (awakening), primarily taking place in Egypt, and partly Syria and elsewhere, which has replaced Abbasid Baghdad as the heart of culture and knowledge in the Arab world. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Young (1927, p. 285) notes, "Cairo is still the intellectual centre of the modern Moslem world. Its principal papers circulate from Fez to Pekin." That timeframe, Hanna (2016) argues, was marked by two voices: a waning traditional intellectual elite including the *'ulamā'* as well as their learners and followers with their classic Azhari background and steadfast commitment to literary traditions, and a new intellectual elite marked by "their secular education and openness to cultures and aesthetics different from what their predecessors used to produce and consume" (p. 77). Like Western missionary schools in Syria, Muḥammad 'Alī's technical schools and foreign missions, while also training a new generation of thinkers and technicians, introduced those students to European, especially French, values and literatures. In addition to its own intelligentsia, Egypt received waves of Syrian émigrés, mostly Christians, including Najīb Sulaymān al-Ḥaddād (d. 1899), Adīb Isḥāq (d. 1885) and Jurjī Zaydān (d. 1914), who were among the leading figures introducing the Arab audience to foreign literary forms. Speaking about the modernist versus traditionalist forces dominating the socio-cultural landscape in the Arab words, particularly Egypt and Syria, at the time, Gibb (1928, p. 747) notes, "the conflict has torn the Arabic world from its

ancient moorings, and that the contemporary literature of Egypt and Syria breathes, in its more recent developments, a spirit foreign to the old traditions."

Surprisingly, the massive flow of literary works that followed is also accompanied by countless retranslations of literary masterpieces for varying, particularly preferential, reasons derived by individual translators. From Homer, Shakespeare and Dante to Voltaire, Hugo, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Dickens, Kafka, Joyce, Camus, Orwell, the works of many European figures, or those writing in colonial European languages such as Márquez, were translated multiple times into Arabic, reflecting their enduring influence in the Arab world and highlighting an unprecedented interest in foreign literature. Shakespeare's famous romance *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, has around a dozen versions in Arabic. Even the verses of the Muslim Persian poet 'Umar al-Khayyām (d. 1131) were only translated into Arabic after their famous English translation by Edward Fitzgerald (Abdulla, 2021).

There is also a strong correlation between the translatability of literary works and colonial or cultural influence. As a culture becomes more dominant based on political, military, commercial or religious drives, its literature becomes more readable, performable and translatable. In many cases, literary translatability is not simply a matter of linguistic compatibility, but also of power dynamics. Dominant cultures often shape global literary tastes and translation priorities. For example, when the ethnic Arabs conquered Persia, Arabic literature, primarily based on poetry, became the dominating form of literary expression. Several Persian figures became prominent scholars in both the Arabic language and literature. Centuries later, European colonial powers exported their languages and literary traditions, making works in English, French or Spanish more visible and frequently translated, especially into the languages

of their colonies or former colonies. In modern times, when European literature became more translatable in Egypt following the French campaign, the French, and partly Italian, works were more translatable since the reign of Ismāʿīl (r. 1863-1879). Both French and Italian translations gradually gave way to the English literature following the British occupation of Egypt and its military, political and cultural hegemony. Again, after decades of domination, even after the liberation of Egypt, the American literature is taking sway. Of course, these translatability shifts reflect the situation in Egypt and probably Syria. In the Maghreb, on the contrary, the French literature is still more translatable than the Anglo-Saxon literature, largely due to the long decades of French colonialism and its cultural hegemony still largely felt today. Postcolonial approaches to translation in these contexts, as Hui (2009, p. 202) notes, "recognize that translation is never neutral, that it is a site of intense ideological and discursive negotiation."

Meanwhile, literary works from marginalized or less powerful cultures often remain less translatable. Different texts from different languages, including Spanish, Chinese and Russian, as well as African languages, are translatable based on the level of cultural contact and influence. Translation from those languages may also be inspired by individual translators who have studied them or lived in the countries where they are spoken. Some translators are even driven by their personal interests in the major themes, or narratives, promoted by the works of prominent literary figures. For instance, the profound interest of the Lebanese translator Suhayl Idrīs (1925-2008), along with his wife, in existentialism drove him to translate several such works by Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir, among others, further inspiring multiple existentialist publications across Syria, Lebanon and other Arab countries (al-Sayyid, 2007).

Unlike the case under the Abbasids, literary translation today takes center stage in the Arab literary polysystem, not only in terms of quantity but also in quality. As for quantity, el-'Isawī (2001) deplorably notes how the proportion of literary to scientific translations suggests that exclusively literary works seem translatable into Arabic. It is also no exaggeration to argue that the number of literary translations and retranslations may be equal to or even larger than the number of original literary works by Arab men of letters. This imbalance has roots in the early years of modern literary translation. As Young (1927, p. 284) argues, "Cairo has two hundred and seventeen printing presses, which turn out on an average one book or brochure a day. Much of this is translation into Arabic of Western fiction." For significance, the modern generations of Arab readers are significantly interested in translated works. Literary translations also have strong influence on intellectual and cultural sensibilities and noticeable impact on Arabic writing styles and way of thinking, helping produce "a new philosophy of life" (Young, 1927, p. 284).

In the following pages, the reasons why literature has become more translatable, and even retranslatable, into Arabic are explored in Section I, selectivity. This section also discusses why, despite this uncontrollable flow of foreign literature, some works may remain untranslatable and unreadable or may require paratextual omissions or socio-narrative adaptations in translation. Section II looks into paratextual details by al-Ṭahṭāwī and al-Manfalūṭī, for instance, to see what inspires Arab translators to select certain texts. The significant absence of paratextual details, like the case with Salman Rushidie's *The Satanic Verses*, is also discussed. The last section discusses adaptive decisions at the textual level to highlight or promote certain narratives or otherwise avoid or mitigate threats to domestic narratives. It discusses different adaptations and

fine-tunings in several translations by al-Ṭahṭāwī and al-Manfalūṭī as well as in Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and Dan Brown's mystery thriller *Inferno*. It also shows how some literary translators could, despite potential narrative threats, take a non-interventionist approach and remain loyal to the source text, such as the case with Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

1. Narrativity

Narrative can be viewed not just as a form of fictional representation or mode of communication but also as a "fundamental human endowment" (Herman, 2007, p. 17). From the stories we tell ourselves or those we tell children at bedtime to the grand stories dominating our lives and guiding our behavior, narrativity encompasses the way stories are structured, communicated and interpreted. It explores how single events are organized into a coherent sequence or plots to convey meaning, evoke emotions and engage audiences. White (1980, p. 5) contends, "So natural is the impulse to narrate, so inevitable is the form of narrative for any report of the way things really happened." Narrative is a historical fact as there is no people, social class or any gathering of individuals without sharing common narratives. As Barthes (1975, p. 237) suggests, "narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative." In addition, MacIntyre (1981/2007, p. 215) sees history itself as "an enacted dramatic narrative," and in that inherently narrative world, "characters are also the authors."

In translation studies, narrative is defined as "public and personal 'stories' that we subscribe to and that guide our behaviour. They are the stories we tell ourselves, not just those we explicitly tell other people, about the world(s) in which we live" (Baker,

2006, p. 19). Following social theorists Somers (1992; 1994) and Somers and Gibson (1994), Baker classifies narrative into four categories:

A. **Ontological, or personal, narratives** relate to what people say and know about themselves. They include "personal stories that we tell ourselves about our place in the world and our own personal history. These stories both constitute and make sense of our lives" (Baker, 2006, p.28).
B. **Public narratives** refer to "those narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual" (Somers & Gibson, 1994, p. 62). They relate to the family, the workplace, religious or political institutions, the media, the literary system, and the nation.
C. **Conceptual or disciplinary narratives** include "the stories and explanations that scholars in any field elaborate for themselves and others about their object of inquiry" (Baker, 2006, p. 39).
D. **Meta or master narratives** are the "epic dramas of our time: Capitalism vs. Communism, the Individual vs. Society, Barbarism/Nature vs. Civility" (Somers, 1994, p. 619). They include religious narratives such as Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as globalized political narratives such as the Cold War and the War on Terror.

In addition, any narrative must have a temporal or spatial sequence (temporality), which originally creates connections among its seemingly isolated events or elements (relationality). Those connections need to be configured in a causal plot, where every element of the story is based on something and leads to another (causal emplotment). As any plot of different elements presents a point of view and has a moral drive, the narrative is originally selective in nature, appropriating some elements while ignoring

others (selective appropriation). Those four elements constitute the basic features of narrative (Somers, 1992; 1994; Somers & Gibson 1994; Baker, 2006).

In fact, any telling of events originally introduces a narrative version of what happened, *framing* or *reframing* happenings into a narrative mold. Following Bruner (1991, p. 4) who contends that narrative is "a version of reality," Hermans et al. (2022, p.13) posit, "Any telling of a narrative is already a version of that narrative, is selective, purposeful and intentional for the moment, tangling with other narratives." Translation, therefore, is no longer seen as a form of "metastatement," where the translator transcodes a text about another text, but rather a process of creating a new text imbued with "its own proper locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary forces" (Tymoczko, 2003, p. 182). While Baker (2006) introduces a non-exhaustive list of devices used for (re)framing narratives in translation, the following SPA model will be more plausible and adaptable to this study:

1. **Selectivity** refers to the macro-level decisions about which texts, genres or authors are translated in specific times and places. These choices are deeply influenced by the narratives embedded in the source texts and the socio-cultural motivations behind their selection or exclusion.
2. **Paratextuality** involves the surrounding textual and visual elements that contextualize a translated work. According to Genette (1987/1997), paratexts include: *peritexts* (e.g., titles, introductions, footnotes) within the text and *epitexts* (e.g., reviews, social media, interviews) outside the text. Paratexts shape how narratives are received and interpreted.
3. **Adaptivity** covers micro-level linguistic strategies – including omissions, substitutions and syntactic alterations – used to align the translation with

domestic or Orientalist narratives. These textual modifications can subtly or overtly reshape meanings to either mitigate ideological risk or support specific narrative agendas.

2. Socio-narrative analysis

2.1 Selectivity

Now, let us explore the reasons behind the renewed interest in literary translations to see why literature became, unlike the case under the Abbasids, more translatable into Arabic. A variety of factors are investigated here, including reduced religious censorship, weakened literary self-sufficiency, the need for novel forms of literary expressions, fading interest in learning, promoting colonial narratives, and profitability. The last part of this section also discusses why certain texts could be largely untranslatable into Arabic through exploring the interplay between literary translatability, readability and free expression.

2.1.1 Reduced religious censorship

In Classical Islam, Greek literary works were partly untranslatable into Arabic for their potential threat to monotheist narratives. More than a millennium after the rise of Islam, the pagan nature of Greek classics, although still originally in conflict with Islamic monotheism, became too insignificant to undermine or raise skepticism in the pure faith in the hearts of the Muslim readership. This led Sulaymān al-Bustānī (1904/2011, p. 59), who translated the *Iliad* into Arabic in the twentieth century, to argue that Greek classics with their pagan mythology have very little impact nowadays and should serve as *'ibra lil-mu'tabir* (offering lessons learned) for modern readers. In Classical Islam, pagan literature was also untranslatable as the caliphs, representing both the political and religious authority, as well as princes and the intellectual elite were the primary

consumers of knowledge and culture. Under the Abbasids, scientific and literary works were even textually adapted to mitigate potential threats to mainstream narratives and thus avoid criticism or even exclusion from those readers. Now, this category of readers is no longer the primary consumers of translated literature. There is also a comparatively lower level of religious censorship, both official and individual, influencing the selectivity and adaptivity of foreign literature. This, however, does not exclude the role official or self-censorship plays in both selectivity and adaptivity based on the level of potential threat to the mainstream narratives in circulation in the target culture.

In addition, along with the Greek legacy, modern Europe has produced a huge tide of literary works in several languages, including French, Italian, English, German and Spanish, however influenced by Greek mythology, which include fewer pagan references. Yet, those same works belong to different narratives, with their own ethics and belief systems, which are still in conflict with the dominant narratives in Islam. This problem was felt as early as the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this timeframe, Arab writers faced a profound "psychological" dilemma, as Gibb (1929) notes, between two conflicting *weltanschauungs* with their undelying shared narratives. Writers had to navigate their way between "either to adhere to the orthodox Muslim world-view or to assimilate the intellectual bases of Western thought and literature" (p. 312). In fact, as noted above, the new intellectual elite of Muḥammad 'Alī's enterprise, combined with the waves of Christian Syrian émigrés, paved the way for a more liberal approach to how literary works are selected and translated. The emerging generation of artists and audiences, as Hanna (2016, p. 77) notes, distinguished itself through secular

schooling and a willingness to engage with cultures and artistic traditions beyond those of earlier generations.

2.1.2 Weakened literary self-sufficiency

Another reason why medieval Arabs were reluctant to translate foreign literature was their profound sense of literary self-sufficiency. Their native literary system was based on a highly celebrated poetic tradition, which they viewed as their *diwān* – a repertoire of historical achievements, wisdom and ethics. This kind of cultural saturation was largely reduced over the centuries that followed the fall of the Abbasid caliphate in 1257 to the French campaign and the modern renaissance under Muḥammad ʻAlī. Since then, a new generation of readers, highly influenced by the European culture, emerged. While there were early attempts to use the verse form in translation, the power of poetry became weaker over the years. Therefore, while you can find poetic translations of foreign dramas, such as Muḥammad ʻUthmān Jalāl's (d. 1898) verse adaptation of Molière's drama *Tartuffe* as *al-Shaykh Matlūf*, in the late nineteenth century, there are few to no poetic drama translations nowadays. In addition, al-Bustānī's verse translation of the *Iliad* in the early decades of the twentieth century, as Gibb (1928, p. ٧٥١) notes, was "the first sustained attempt to present a masterpiece of classical literature in a form which the Arabic world could assimilate." Yet, the *Iliad* was retranslated twice later into prose. As there is noticeable aversion to long epic poetry in Arabic (Abdulla, 2021), some verse masterpieces like Shakespeare's sonnets, by contrast, have many translations in Arabic. The renowned Egyptian historian and writer Aḥmad Amīn (1886-1954) also criticizes the shortage of classical literary traditions in texts that can reflect modern life, educate and entertain modern readers. Amīn (1927, p. 484) asks, "Where are the Arabic novels that reflect our social life? Where are the Arabic

poems that echo our emotions today? Where are the interesting Arabic books that we can give to our young men and women to educate them? Where are the amusing illustrated stories that we can share with our children?"

2.1.3 Novel forms of literary expressions

For centuries, the *qaṣīda* verse form largely remained the exclusive form of literary expression in Arabic. The Arab legacy of famous battles, wisdom and ethics, along with the countless themes of love, courage, generosity, hospitality, honoring promises, helping vulnerable people and supporting neighbors, to mention only a few, were exclusively expressed in verse, with its formal restrictions of rhyme and rhythm. As Gibb (1929, p. 314) claims, "Classical Arabic literature offered practically no models for prose works of entertainment in the modern style." In modern times, the Arab readers were introduced to novel forms of literary expression, which were more liberal than the *qaṣīda* form. Writers can express different views, highlight virtues and criticize social and political phenomena through the more flexible molds of narration and dramatization – combined with the essay form of newspaper and journal articles which flourished since the nineteenth century. This is a reason why the new Arab audience, since the late nineteenth century, shifted to writing and translating novels and dramas, which now use easier lexis and syntax compared to the language of classical poetry. Since Muḥammad 'Alī, "The secularization of educational institutions," Hanna (2016, p. 76) argues, "led to the emergence of new generations of young Egyptians who were obviously disillusioned by classical culture and whose aesthetic needs called for new modes of cultural production." Some translators also seized this opportunity to select certain works that highlight significant narratives in their spatio-temporal context while also avoiding direct criticism. Muṣṭafa Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī's translations are a prime

example. His *Fī Sabīl al-Tāj*, an adaptation of François Coppée's *Pour La Couronne*, is both selected and adapted in a way that highlights the narratives of patriotism and anti-colonialism in British Egypt (for more on this, see below). In addition, al-Manfalūṭī's original essays and short stories, as well as a range of French short story translations, provide a revealing commentary on social problems.

2.1.4 Fading interest in learning

The period from the Mogul conquest of Baghdad to the French campaign saw massive illiteracy, stagnation, superstitions, widespread foreign languages accompanied by a weekend native tongue, and an almost complete isolation from the modern intellectual advancements taking place in Europe. In that timeframe, the Arab nations – especially Egypt and Syria, the heart of the Muslim world after the fall of Baghdad – were controlled by the non-Arab Mamluks, followed by the Ottomans, and finally European imperialism. Even during the post-colonial period, the Arab populations are still culturally controlled by formidable Western influences, often prompting them to emulate their foreign colonizers, as Ibn Khaldūn (١٣٧٧/2005) notes, in almost everything. Beyond noticeable aversion to scientific and technical learning, translating foreign literature spearheads emulation tendencies. In the preface to his translation of the French pedagogue Edmond Demolins' *À quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons?* [Anglo-Saxon superiority: To What it is Due], Aḥmad Fatḥī Zaghlūl (1899) attributes the high translatability and readability of foreign literature to the weekend curious spirit of generations of Arab people: "This is a reason why there is a massive shift to reading stories and myths, buying trivial works and memorizing obscene texts and novels" (p. 21).

2.1.5 Promoting colonial narratives

To justify imperial policies, the key narrative typically propagated by European colonizers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries tried to frame both military invasion and economic exploitation as a civilizing mission, a moral duty to introduce the so-called "backward" societies to progress, modernity and enlightenment. Colonized nations were often portrayed as primitive, ignorant or uncivilized. In addition to preaching Christianity and launching infrastructure projects, such as roads, railways, hospitals, schools and industry, colonial powers tried to present themselves as saviors of their colonized people. Rudyard Kipling's (1899) poem the *White Man's Burden* aptly summarizes this narrative:

> Take up the White Man's burden
> Send forth the best ye breed
> Go bind your sons to exile
> To serve your captives' need;
> To wait in heavy harness
> On fluttered folk and wild
> Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
> Half devil and half child. (lines, 1-8)

This narrative could be subtly, or explicitly, found in the writings of many European writers. Literature, of course, is no exception, and without translation, narratives would remain largely local and cannot "travel across linguistic and cultural boundaries" (Baker, 2006a, p. 467). Whether directly funded, facilitated or simply encouraged by colonization officials or native sympathizers and subjects, literary works translated from European languages helped promote this narrative. Translations were used not only to make the Arab audience familiar with new modes of literary expression, but also to promote, whether consciously or otherwise, European values through the works of

Voltaire, Rousseau, Molière, Hugo and Shakespeare, to mention only a few. Some of these translations had prefaces that clearly framed the effort as a way to combat ignorance, promote rationality or instill values. These works, or simply carefully chosen extracts of them, were often introduced in curricula in the schools of the Arab colonies to form an elite class that would adopt the colonizer's worldview.

2.1.6 Profitability

Each war has its own profiteers. Similarly, consumption trends are always seized by business-minded people. Culture is no exception, of course. The massive shift to literary works opened a lucrative opportunity for publishers to make significant gains. Countless publishers are indiscriminately recruiting translators, including beginners and undergraduates, to translate almost any literary work by any figures, for proportionately lower rates. Few to no selection criteria are used. Why that text? Why that writer? Why that time? Many publishers cannot answer these questions, and even if they could, theirs would largely be shaped by productivity. They want to maintain a repertoire of titles and an interrupted supply of literary translations to make their business running and competitive in an already dormant reading market. In fact, this tendency has echoes in the early decades of modern times. Unlike the *'ulamā'* who had different sources of livelihood, for the new intellectual elite of freelance translators, journalists, theater makers and writers who emerged since the mid-nineteenth century, as Hanna (2016) notes, the marketability of the new forms of cultural products was their primary livelihood and main source of funding for maintaining production.

2.1.7 Literary translatability, readability and free expression

That said, not every foreign literary work is absolutely translatable and readable in the Arab world. As al-Sayyid (2007, p. 73) notes, "As the literary system is not wide open to

let anything in, it acts as a resistant medium that sifts the works that could pass through." Some literary works are censored or banned in the Arab world, either in whole or in part, for reasons ranging from religious offense to political criticism, sexual content or challenges to social norms. The bans reflect attempts to suppress narratives deemed morally corrupt, politically dangerous or culturally inappropriate. Like the case in Romania in the mid-twentieth century (Tamba, 2013), China during its Cultural Revolution (Tan, 2015) and Japan during its early modern history (Hadley, 2016), there is a connection between the translatability of literary works and free expression. Political regimes usually intervene in selectivity, deciding which works to translate or not to translate. Those who break the norm are usually banned and become less readable. At varying times and places, some novels are banned in the Arab countries. Famous examples include George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which is often read as a critique of socialism and authoritarian regimes, as well as his *1984*, which critically highlights totalitarianism, surveillance and state repression. In many cases, such works are translated into Arabic but censored, restricted or banned. Although these restrictions, ironically, could help circulate the banned works, they often reflect state efforts to suppress content critical of authoritarianism, social injustice or state ideology. In addition, some works which are seen as too prejudiced against the mainstream narratives are not translated, including, for example, Voltaire's play *Le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le Prophète* [*Fanaticism, or Mahomet the Prophet*], which portrays the Prophet Muḥammad as a ruthless leader who uses religion to justify political ambition and personal gain. Similarly Richard Bean's immigrant satire *England People Very Nice* attacks Bangladeshi Muslims – as well as French Huguenot, Irish and Jewish immigrants. Bean's satire includes blatant criticisms of key Islamic tenets based on overt misconceptions, including polygamy, veil, handshaking, consanguineous marriage,

giving sons to mosques, hatred of non-Muslims, coercing children into learning the Qur'ān, and terrorism. These prejudices could make the text largely untranslatable into Arabic. Untranslatability here acts as a form of resistance, rejecting translation altogether because of a serious attack on the dominant narratives of the target Arab-Muslim audience. If anyone attempts a translation, several decisions would be necessary to tone down these prejudices. Other paratextual decisions, as the case with *The Satanic Verses* (see below), could also be essential. In fact, this resistant untranslatability is largely based on the fact that some works are written for one exclusive audience or set of audiences (Vuorinen, 1995). A potentially untranslatable work of art could, therefore, remain local and have no chance of becoming part of the world literature.

2.2 Paratextuality

As Hermans et al. (2022, p. 13) posit, "Any telling of a narrative is already a version of that narrative, is selective, purposeful and intentional for the moment, tangling with other narratives." Like the case with other genres, literary translators usually use their peritextual prefaces to introduce the work by giving an overview of the writer's biography and the work's plot and major themes. Some translators may discuss linguistic and stylistic challenges and solutions in handling the work, highlighting their textual decisions, or, in the words of Dickins et al. (2002, pp. 6-7), their "strategic decisions" and "decisions of detail." Sometimes, they show why they have selected a certain work for translation, often trying to portray the text favorably and make the reader excited to pursue reading. The work's threats to domestic narratives, either by being in conflict with cultural, religious or political sensitivities or by explicitly attacking them, could also be addressed.

In his preface to François Fénelon's didactic novel *Les Aventures de Télémaque* [The Adventures of Telemachus], probably the first French novel in Arabic, al-Ṭahṭāwī shows why he found the work highly translatable. Al-Ṭahṭāwī (2010, p. 453) explains, "A fundamental textbook across Europe, this text combines valuable stories and countless morals and is a rich source in ethics and polity." He emphasizes the fundamental values that make the text appellative to the mainstream narratives in the target culture, in this case, and as a reminiscent of the Abbasid legacy, its ethics and best practices in governance. *Les Aventures de Télémaque* was originally written to instill wisdom and virtue and promote the idea of a ruler who is wise and just rather than powerful and despotic – perfectly appealing themes to domestic narratives.

Decades after al-Ṭahṭāwī, Muṣṭafa Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī (1876–1924), an influential Egyptian writer and translator[1] during the Arab *Nahḍa*, offers another prime example. His translations, as Negri (2020, p. 161) notes, "ought to be considered a new original work perhaps even divorced from the discourses and views of the source text." Al-Manfalūṭī's peritextual notes in his adaptations of French literary works highlight the key narratives that urged him to select each work:

- Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* is translated into Arabic as *al-Faḍīla* [Virtue], highlighting the master theme which urged de Saint-Pierre to write the novel in the first place, a theme which resonates perfectly well with domestic (ontological, public and meta) narratives in Arabic. In addition to the title adaptation, the peritextual note – dedication – highlights two key themes: "What I like most in boys is bravery and boldness and in girls shyness" (al-Manfalūṭī, 2021, p. 5).

[1] In fact, al-Manfalūṭī's adaptations, as he himself admits, are based on initial drafts by other people who could read and translate French works.

- Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* is a French play which al-Manfalūṭī has translated as *al-Shā'ir* [The Poet]. The new title stresses the power of words as the protagonist Cyrano is a poet whose eloquence defines him; his poetic wit is more powerful than swords, often using language to express love, challenge enemies and shape his own legacy. In the preface, while showing his textual adaptations at the micro level, al-Manfalūṭī also stresses the theme of virtue, which is the "source and focus of all human values" (p. 159).
- François Coppée's *Pour La Couronne* is translated as *Fī Sabīl al-Tāj* [For the Crown]. While maintaining the title, which echoes the translator's own sentiments, al-Manfalūṭī dedicates this narrative adaptation of the French play to Sa'd Zaghlūl, the nationalist leader in Egypt's struggle for independence from British colonial rule. The dedication highlights the key personal traits of the protagonist, Constantine Brancomir, which, for the translator, echo Zaghlūl's own fabric, including "courage, steadfastness, determination, national jealousy, loyalty and sacrifice" (p. 549). The translator also hopes that by translating this work, and by promoting those same values, he could be part of the national legacy Zaghlūl is leaving behind. In another preface, Ḥasan el-Sherīf (2021), another cotemporary writer to al-Manfalūṭī, shows how *Pour La Couronne* is adapted to serve a social and national enterprise.

> In this adaptation, al-Manfalūṭī seems to have introduced what he could not otherwise express in political newspapers. In fact, we have often blamed him for his silence and reluctance to be part of the national movement. Only after reading this work, it has become clear that his noble nationalist spirit is clearly reflected throughout the novel, aptly portraying the current situation. (p. 551)

This shows how al-Manfalūṭī's translations were used to highlight key themes that promote domestic narratives and also illustrate how those novels were intentionally selected to address socio-narrative concerns in the spatio-temporal setting, stressing patriotism and anti-colonialism, the power of words and the value of morality which became in danger following the blind emulation of European ethics. In this sense, the new narrative mode gave a fresh voice to otherwise voiceless figures who wanted to address social and national concerns. Speaking about al-Manfalūṭī, Gibb (1929, 317) argues, "His social outlook was dominated by the idealistic and doctrinaire naturalism of the eighteenth century."

As shown above, some works could remain largely untranslatable because they contradict or attack mainstream narratives or would cost the translator's, as well as publisher's, money, reputation or even life. Salman Rushidie's controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* is a prime example due to its blasphemous references. The works tries to reimagine and raise skepticism in the Prophet Muḥammad's (Mahound) reception of divine revelation. According to Hirwani (2022), Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa ordering Muslims to kill Rushdie. Hitoshi Igarashi, the first Japanese scholar to translate *The Satanic Verses*, was found dead in 1991. In addition, many publishers and translators of the work into several languages were frequently rebuked, attacked or shot. From a socio-narrative perspective, *The Satanic Verses* is potentially untranslatable into Arabic – as well as into languages with a Muslim population whose response may be negative or even violent. There is an Arabic version, however. Yet, it is exclusively available online and is a highly abridged version of the original. This challenge to the perceived untranslatability of the work, while underscoring the translator's or commissioner's malign intentions by promoting this

prejudiced narrative of revelation, had to sacrifice valuable peritextual details. Quite understandably, the Arabic version is anonymous; there is no identified translator or publisher, nor is there any other prefaces, cover page, year or place of publication.[2] Of course, the hidden information is meant to avoid backlash from the proponents of the metanarratives of Islam in the Arab world, to avoid the fate of other translators and publishers. This, it seems, highlights a crisis of trust. Chesterman (2016) explains:

> The translator also needs to trust the original writer, and also the commissioner of the translation: there must be a trust that the translation itself is worth doing. Translators must also trust that their readers will read the translation in good faith, that their readers in turn will trust that there is 'something there' in the translation that makes it worth reading. (p. 178)

As they understand that readers distrust Rushdie and his counter narrative, both the translator and commissioner chose to hide their identities and avoid taking accountability for their translation. The absence of a formally, whether soft or print, published version of the translation may reflect their desire for purely moral reward, driven by a wish to introduce the Arab readership to Rushdie's narrative without seeking any material gains.[3] Yet, as this study suggests, this could change over time, although relatively hard with mainstream religious narratives. That is, the socio-cultural context could change, prompting the translator and/or commissioner to reveal their identity. This is what happened with the Arabic translation of the French version of John Waterbury's *The Commander of the Faithful: The Moroccan Political Elite*[4] as *Amīr al-Mu'minīn: Al-Malakiya wa al-Nukhba al-Siyāsiya al-Maghribiya*, a work which examines

[2] Only one insignificant footnote can be found.

[3] This does not exclude hidden agendas that finance similar projects.

[4] The French version translated into Arabic is titled *Le Commandeur des Croyants. La Monarchie Marocaine et son Elite*.

Morocco's political elite during the post-colonial era, offering insights into the country's political landscape following its independence from France in 1956. The Arabic version was first published in 1981 with fake names. Some 20 years later, a new edition was published, showing the true identity of the translators who argue that they initially remained anonymous for fear of backlash. Abū al-'Azm et al. (2013) explain:

> This translation, it should be also noted, is now nearly a quarter-century old. The first edition, completed in Paris between 1979 and 1980, was published anonymously to avoid potential persecution, as the book was banned at the time – despite being a strictly academic work that presents the perspective of a foreign scholar, with whom we may or may not concur. (p. 38)

2.3 Adaptivity

Although he believes that loyalty should not be considered the only maxim of translation quality assessment, al-Sayyid (2007) admits that the tradition of literary translations has countless examples of textual interventions, where the translator omits or adds some elements or parts, for religious, political or social concerns, eventually, he contends, disrupting the overall message of the source text. It is quite normal to find literary translators taking adaptive decisions here and there to highlight certain narrative or mitigate potential threats to domestic narratives. Not every translator, in every text, and at all times, can make those socio-narrative adaptations. They are shaped by the commissioner's instructions, reviewer's feedback, if any, types of readers, socio-political context, religious and cultural sensitivities, and similar considerations. Again, such fine-tunings may also be inspired by self-censorship or forced by official censorship. Although Gibb (1928) admits that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emerged a more open-minded generation of writers, and by extension

translators who were also writers, "the past still plays a part in their intellectual background, and there is a section amongst them upon whom that past retains a hold scarcely shaken by newer influences" (p. 746). That hold, it seems, is still unshakable.

Adaptivity in modern literary translations started as early as the first half of the nineteenth century, when al-Ṭahṭāwī and his contemporaries temporarily revived, under Muḥammad 'Alī, the legacy of scientific works and textbooks, which soon gave way to an interrupted flow of literary translations. On prefacing his translation of François Fénelon's didactic novel *Les Aventures de Télémaque* [The Adventures of Telemachus], al-Ṭahṭāwī shows how he tried to remain loyal to the source text by avoiding any semantic changes. Yet, he also stresses that he found some instances which forced him to stick to the underlying meaning, eventually sacrificing textual elements that challenge mainstream narratives, or in his own terms those which are *mukhilan bil-'āda* (contradictory to customs), a tactic which he finds "normal" in translation (al-Ṭahṭāwī, 2010, p. 453). Here is an example of such adaptive decisions:

> Télémaque lui répondit: **O vous, qui que vous soyez, mortelle ou déesse (quoique à vous voir on ne puisse vous prendre que pour une divinité)**, seriez-vous insensible au malheur d'un fils, qui, cherchant son père à la merci des vents et des flots, a vu briser son navire contre vos rochers? (Fénelon, 1912, p. 5; emphasis added)

> **"Whoever thou art,"** replied Telemachus; "**whether thou art indeed a goddess, or whether, with all the appearance of divinity, thou art yet mortal**; canst thou regard with insensibility the misfortunes of a son, who, committing his life to the caprice of the winds and waves in search of a father,

has suffered shipwreck against these rocks?" (Fénelon, 1847, p. 4; emphasis added)

فأجابها تليماك بقوله: **أيتها الملكة،** ارفقي بحالة ولد يبحث عن أبيه عرضة للأخطار والأمواج والعواصف التي كسرت سفينته على شواطئ جزيرتك بعد أن قاسى ما قاسي من الأهوال، وقذفته المقادير إلى أمام حضرتك. (Tagher, 1945/2014, p. 133; emphasis added)

Telemachus replied, **O Queen**, be merciful to a boy who, searching for his father, has faced dangers, waves and storms, which wrecked his ship on the shores of your island after he had experienced so many horrors, and fate threw him before Your Majesty.

Les Aventures de Télémaque recounts the story of Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, as he embarks on a journey to search for his father, who has been lost since the end of the Trojan War. Greek history and mythology, with their rich pagan references, form the spatio-temporal context of this work. This is what the protagonist highlights here, addressing a queen who blurs the lines between humanity and divinity. Reviving the legacy of his Abbasid ancestors, al-Ṭahṭāwī finds omission a safe haven, choosing to censor this entire reference to avoid potential threats to the narratives his readers embrace.

Decades later, al-Manfalūṭī, who was influenced by the "religious reform movement, pan-Islamism and the rise of Egyptian nationalism" (Gibb, 1929, p. 316), takes suit. In his preface to *al-Shā'ir* [The Poet], a novelized reading of Edmond Rostand's play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, al-Manfalūṭī describes his liberal approach to translation. While showing that he tried to remain loyal to Rostand's choices, he explicitly claims that he had to "omit some insignificant sentences while adding others which proved to be necessary for translation" (al-Manfalūṭī, 2021, p. 159). To highlight the narratives of patriotism

and anti-colonialism in British Egypt, al-Manfalūṭī takes the same approach to extreme in his *Fī Sabīl al-Tāj*, a free adaptation of François Coppée's *Pour La Couronne*. The Arabic version of *Pour La Couronne* is highly abridged, presenting a novelized version of the original play, omitting many details, such as stage settings and minor characters, while introducing an omniscient narrator and shifting the verse form into classical Arabic prose (Negri, 2020). The play is about the Ottoman-Balkan wars in the fifteenth century, with the protagonists trying to defend their country against the Ottoman army. The play explores the themes of patriotism, **heroism, national pride** and the tragedy of war. Al-Manfalūṭī's version, however, "domesticates the orientalist anti-Islamic pan-Christian nationalist discourse embodied in the source text to create an anti-colonial pan-Islamic one through the same narrative design" (Negri, 2020, p. 161). Although al-Manfalūṭī typically introduces his translations on the cover page with this phrase, *ta'rīb ma'a ba'ḍ taṣarruf* (translation with a few adaptations), and identifies himself as the translator, or in fact adaptor, of each French work he produces, only in *Fī Sabīl al-Tāj* does he identify himself as the author, underscoring his extreme adaptive approach to handling this work. On many occasions, al-Manfalūṭī seizes the opportunity to provide a social critique of military occupation and the narratives the colonizer often promotes.

Foreshadowing the narrative of the White Man's Burden propagated by European imperialism as the Ottoman Empire was falling apart, an Ottoman soldier tries to show how the Ottoman invasion is a good thing for the Balkans:

فإنَّا لا نريد أن ندخل بلادكم مُستعبِدين أو مُسترقين، بل أصدقاء مخلصين، وما خطر ببالنا قط حينما فكرنا في افتتاح بلادكم والنزول بها أن نُصادركم في حريتكم الدينية والاجتماعية، أو نسلب أموالكم وننتهك أعراضكم، أو نغلق أبواب كنائسكم ومعابدكم، أو نخرس أصوات نواقيسكم وأجراسكم، ولكن لنكون أعوانكم على ترقية شئونكم

الاجتماعية والاقتصادية، والسَّير بكم في طريق المدنية الأدبية والسياسية، حتى تبلغوا الذروة العليا منهما، ولنحميكم فوق ذلك من أعدائكم المَجَريين الذين يطمعون في امتلاك بلادكم واغتيالها، وندفع عنكم شرورهم ومطامعهم، فنحن أصدقاؤكم المخلصون الأوفياء من حيث تظنون أننا أعداؤكم وخصومكم. (al-Manfalūṭī, 2021, p. 577)

We do not want to enter your country as enslavers but as sincere friends. When we planned to conquer you, it never occurred to us to restrict your religious and social freedom, rob your property, rape your women and girls, or shut down your churches and temples and silence their bells. Instead, we do want to support you in improving your social and economic conditions and to help you move toward maximum cultural and political progress. Above all, we also want to protect you from your Hungarian enemies who seek to seize your country and kill your people, but we will repel their evils and avarice and disrupt their plans. While you may think we are your enemies, we are really your sincere friends.

The reply to the narrative of the Ottoman soldier echoes al-Manfauti's own sentiments, acting here as his mouthpiece. The reply highlights a counter narrative that exposes the underlying intentions of colonial powers:

[إ]ني أعلم — كما تعلم أنت وكما يعلم الساسة الكاذبون جميعًا — أن الفاتحين من عهد آدم إلى اليوم، وإلى أن تُبدَّل الأرض غير الأرض والسماوات، لا يفتحون البلاد للبلاد، بل لأنفسهم، ولا يمتلكونها لرفع شأنها وإصلاح حالها، والأخذ بيدها في طريق الرقي والكمال كما تقول، بل لامتصاص دمها وأكل لحمها وعَرق عَظمها، وقتل جميع موارد الحياة فيها. (al-Manfalūṭī, 2021, p. 577)

I know – as much as you and all hypocrite politicians know – that conquerors, from the time of Adam until today, and until the earth and heavens are replaced by other

forms of earth and heavens, do not conquer a country for its own people, but for themselves. They do not seize a nation to improve the well-being of its people and help them advance, as you claim, but rather to exploit its resources, rob its wealth and decimate all sources of life…

إنكم ما جئتم هنا لتحمونا من أعدائنا، بل لتحتموا بنا من أعدائكم؛ لأنكم إنما أردتم بامتلاك هذه البلاد واستعمارها أن تتخذوا من حصونها وقلاعها وجبالها وأسوارها ودماء أبنائها وأرواحهم وقايةً لكم تتقون بها زحف المجريين عليكم وعدوانهم على أرضكم (al-Manfalūṭī, 2021, p. 578)

You have not come to protect us from our enemies but to take shelter in our country from your own enemies. In fact, you only want to seize our country to use its fortresses, castles, mountains, ramparts and the blood and lives of its people as a shield against the advancing Hungarians and their aggression against your own land.

This reply is a powerful critique of imperialism and the hypocrisy of conquest cloaked in noble intentions. It highlights colonial rhetoric and the self-serving nature of conquest, exposing the stark contrast between the stated altruistic motives of occupiers and their actual exploitative intentions. In addition, throughout *Fī Sabīl al-Tāj*, there is explicit criticism of native kings in occupied nations, the shameful act of treason, social injustice and poverty leading people to crimes and sins, including prostitution. Al-Manfalūṭī describes native people who help colonizers for money or positions as kings seeking a “wooden chair inlaid with gold, which the ignorant calls a throne, but in a country that is oppressed and deprived of its freedom and independence, it is simply a narrow prison” (al-Manfalūṭī, 2021, p. 579). Al-Manfalūṭī’s approach in this text, and elsewhere as well, reflects a profound policy of selectivity, paratextuality and adaptivity

which gives priority to socio-cultural concerns. In the context of power struggle and post-colonial settings, as Hui (2009, p. 203) notes, "western intellectual production should be sifted, appropriated and naturalized in the service of dominated languages/cultures." This practice also matches the cannibalistic approach to translation in Brazil, one which made drastic adaptations to foreign works to align with and serve domestic narratives (Gavronsky, 1977).

In fact, the adaptive decisions taken by both al-Ṭahṭāwī and al-Manfalūṭī are not exceptional cases in the history of literary translations in modern times. Shakespeare's multiple translations feature similar socio-narrative interventions. Hanna (2016), for example, explores how Shakespeare is adapted in Arabic to align with Arab cultural norms and political ideologies, particularly during periods of nationalism and colonial resistance.

Dante's *The Divine Comedy – Inferno* provides another salient example. In canto xxviii, there is a highly pejorative part describing both the Prophet Muḥammad and his cousin 'Alī suffering horrific punishment for preaching what Dante views as a sinful faith. In the first Arabic version of this famous Italian classic, the translator Ḥasan 'Uthmān choses to omit these verses altogether because he found them *ghayra jadīra bil-tarjama* (unworthy of translation), contending that Dante's argument is based on prejudiced narratives that do not "appreciate the true message of Islam nor understand its divine wisdom" (Dante, 1988, p. 371). However, al-Sayyid (2007, p. 67) criticizes this intervention, contending that, by doing so, the translator denies the Arab reader the access to "the cultural and intellectual milieu in medieval Europe, which prompted the Crusades, based on the negative narratives about Islam there." This omission, he further argues, "bereaves the Arab reader from understanding the root causes of these historically strained relations between the East and the West" (p. 67). Almost half a

century later, the second Arabic translation of *The Divine Comedy*, by Qāẓim Jihād, employs a different tactic. Contrary to 'Uthmān's omission, Jihād choses to translate those potentially risky lines, but without directly naming Muḥammad nor 'Alī. Instead, he omits Muḥammad's name entirely, replacing it with ellipses "…", and refers to 'Alī only as "the cousin" (Idlibi, 2018). Although both versions employ a different method to handling this highly sensitive issue, each is aware of the impact of the pejorative nature of these verses and their high level of threat to the mainstream narrative of the Arab-Muslim readership. A translator may claim loyalty to the original text, but doing so, with culturally, religiously and politically sensitive texts and textual elements, could lead to a negative reception among the target audience, potentially affecting not just the immediate work, but also the translator's broader reputation and future translations.

Similar adaptations could be found in the Arabic version of Dan Brown's mystery thriller *Inferno*, which explores many themes such as identity, memory, the influence of fear, science versus morality, and the role of art and literature in solving modern crises. In her exploration of *Inferno* in Arabic, Abbas (2015) focuses on taboos, which include risky references to "human body, sex, profanity, blasphemy, and non-Islamic religious references" (p. 11). She argues that taboo censorship in Arabic is largely "motivated by politeness and political correctness" (p. 28). Although she does not explicitly discuss the socio-narrative theory, so do many researchers handling similar topics, her findings strongly illustrate that the Arabic translator, Zīna Idrīs, carefully weighs the cultural impact of her choices. This led her to take several textual decisions to mitigate the potential threat of the religious or sexual content to domestic narratives. Here is a brief summary of a comparative analysis of Brown's *Inferno* in English and Arabic (Abbas, 2015, pp. 28-72):

A. Explicit names of genitals:

- *Euphemism/censorship (omission)*

  The explicit names of genitals are either omitted or replaced with general words, such as *'ārī* (naked) and *ibāḥī* (immoral).

B. Sex-related references:

- *Euphemism*

  "sexually provocative painting" → *lawḥa muthīra* (exciting painting)

  "sexual attraction" → *jāzbiya 'amīqa* (deep attraction)

  "awkward sexual fears" → *makhāwif makbūta* (suppressed fears)

- *Censorship (omission)*

  "[Ten minutes later, we are in Zobrist's hotel room,] naked in each other's arms. Zobrist takes his time, his patient hands coaxing sensations I've never felt before out of my inexperienced body."

C. Alcoholic references

- *Euphemism*

  "Scotch/Champagne/wine/beer" → *sharab/zujāja* (drink/bottle)

D. Swearwords

- *Euphemism*

  "holy shit/damn it" → *tabban* (heck)

  "bullshit" → *hurā'* (nonsense)

E. Religious references

- *Euphemism*

  "… even **the gods** were conflicted" → *abṭāl al-asāṭīr* (legendary heroes)

- *Censorship*

"What if God was wrong?"

"Santa Claus"

"At Jesus' right hand, the righteous received the reward of everlasting life…"

As both official and self-censorship weakened over the time, however, adaptivity in some literary translations could be hardly felt. A clear example is the two Arabic versions of Gabriel García Márquez's novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* by both Saleh 'Almānī, a prolific Syrian translator of Latin American literature, and Aḥmad Majdī Manjūd, a young translator from Egypt. The romance is marked by its explicit sexual content, **particularly the scenes of the protagonist Florentino Ariza, normally violating public decency norms** in the target culture. Yet, such scenes and descriptions are hardly censored in the two Arabic versions, which still carry almost the same graphic details. In both, you can feel that the translators are more loyal to the source culture and less conscious of the domestic religious and cultural sensitivities. While this may sound loyalty and, even neutrality according to some thinkers and readers, it is still not neutral. Loyalty to the source text could be seen as submissive acceptance of the author's original narratives. By translating them into a culture with counter values, the translators are helping promote something which can potentially threaten domestic narratives. From the socio-narrative perspective, loyalty to the source text turns into a subversive tool that undermines ontological, public and mainstream narratives.

3. Summary

This article has traced the translatability of literary works in modern times. The primary reasons behind this massive literary flow were discussed. They include reduced religious censorship, weakened literary self-sufficiency, the need for novel forms of literary expressions, fading interest in learning, promoting colonial narratives, and profitability. The partial untranslatability of some works was also investigated to show why some literary works could not easily lend themselves for translation. Another section looked into the paratexts – peritextual prefaces – of some translations by al-Ṭahṭāwī and al-Manfalūṭī to see why they were translated. The absence of paratextual details, like the case with the *Satanic Verses*, underscores the potential threat of the text to mainstream narratives. The last section discussed the adaptive decisions taken by translators at the textual level to highlight or promote certain narratives or otherwise avoid threatening domestic narratives. It also showed how some translators could hold to the "loyalty narrative" and avoid taking similar tactic decisions, however threatening the text is to local narratives.