A Barbarian in Rome, On Writing and Translating Between Two Literatures: A Conversation with Sinan Antoon[1]

Sinan Antoon/ Interviewed by: Bashair Alibrahim
New York University/ University of Alberta-King Saud University
bashair@ualberta.ca

ABSTRACT

Contrasting bilingual texts through textual analysis might be the first step towards understanding the practice of self-translation. However, theorists like Antoine Berman have long highlighted the individual "translation project" as a backdrop against which scholars can interpret the choices of the translator. In *Self-Translation: Brokering Originality in Hybrid Culture,* Anthony Cordingly further highlights the figure of the self-translator as a cultural broker, as well as the importance of reading the textual analysis of a self-translated text against the personal project of the author/translator. This interview aims to elucidate the practice of the Iraqi-American author/translator Sinan Antoon through an interview that sheds light on his bilingual work *Wahdaha Shajarat Alrumman* (Only the Pomegranate Tree) (2010), published in English as *The Corpse Washer* (2013). In this conversation, Antoon discusses writing between two literatures, as well as transferring his own writing from peripheral Arabic towards the hegemonic centre of the English language.

KEYWORDS: bilingual writing; self-translation; Sinan Antoon; writing in the empire

نبذة مختصرة:

قد يبدو تحليل النصوص ثنائية اللغة للوهلة الأولى الطريقة المثلى لفهم الترجمة الذاتية، غير أن عددا من المنظرين، أمثال أنطوان بيرمان، يشيرون إلى أهمية معرفة "المشروع الترجمي" الفردي كخلفية يمكن على ضوئها استقراء خيارات المترجم. في كتابه بعنوان "الترجمة الذاتية: مفاوضة الأصالة في ثقافة التهجين" يبرز انتوني كوردينجلي دور المترجم الذاتي بشكل خاص كمضارب ما بين ثقافتين, كما يؤكد على أهمية قراءة التحليل النصي للنصوص ثنائية اللغة على ضوء المشروع الشخصي للكاتب / المترجم. يتطلع هذا اللقاء إلى تسليط الضوء على الترجمة الذاتية للكاتب العراقي – الامريكي سنان أنطون من خلال حوار يناقش ترجمته الذاتية لروايته "وحدها شجرة الرمان" (٢٠١٠)، التي أنجز الكاتب ترجمتها الانجليزية لتنشر بعنوان The Corpse Washer (٢٠١٣). في هذا الحوار,

[1] This interview took place in October 14th, 2019 at the New York University campus- New York City. The interview was conducted mainly in Arabic, then translated into English by the interviewer.

يحدثنا سنان أنطون –الكاتب والمترجم– عن الكتابة بين وسطين أدبيين, كما يحدثنا عن نقل العمل الإبداعي من أدب الأطراف (الأدب العربي) إلى أدب المركز (الأدب الانجليزي)، إلى ماذلك من تحديات الانتقال بين الثقافة الأم والثقافة المهيمنة.

1. Introduction

The bilingual writing of authors coming from peripheral languages is often interpreted as a pragmatic move; their self-translation into a hegemonic language being commonly viewed as a point of access to a wider, central audience. However, it is essential to note that the experience of self-translators between two asymmetrical literatures (in terms of symbolic capital) is a multifaceted practice that often entails much more than an access to a wider readership or a presence in a larger literature. In order to fully contextualise the crossover between two unequal literatures (in terms of symbolic capital), it is useful to compare it to the bilingual experience of authors like Samuel Beckett, Julien Greene or Nancy Huston, who self-translate between two literatures that share nearly equivalent symbolic capital (i.e. English and French). These authors are accepted by default as fully-fledged creative writers in their newly adopted language of expression; a status that is not equally enjoyed by other authors, who make it up or down the cultural ladder into, or out of, a hegemonic culture/literature. The latter are often met with what Sinan Antoon describes in this interview as the "forensic interest" in their literature by the newly adopted culture. Their writing is, therefore, not received as the creative expression it is, but is often used as "evidence" in support of political, cultural, or moral judgments about an entire culture. In other instances, publishers or editors require that the double writing of authors from the Global South "complies" with certain artistic norms in the central literature, or is expected to fit stereotypes or entertain specific themes from their culture of origin. These are but a few discrepancies of self-translating between symmetrical and asymmetrical literatures[2]. Due to the accessibility of hegemonic languages, among many other reasons, a lot of ink has been spilled on the discussion of self-translations of authors who write between two central languages/literatures,

[2] While space does not allow an extensive look into self-translation and cultural (a)symmetry, a further discussion of the topic can be found in: Cf. Grutman, Rainier. "Autotraduction, aasymétrie, extraterritorialité". *Autotraduction aux frontières de la langue et de la culture*. Edited by Christian Lagarde and Helena Tanqueiro. Lambert-Lucas. Limoges, 2013, pp. 37-45.

while the practice of authors from the Global South, who write between literatures of their origins and central literatures, is slowly gaining a growing attention in the field of Translation Studies.

Through an interview that sheds light on his bilingual work *Wahdaha Shajarat Alrumman* (*The Pomegranate Tree Alone*) (2010), published in English as *The Corpse Washer* (2013), Sinan Antoon compares his position to that of a cultural broker between two worlds. Poet, novelist, translator and professor of Arabic literature and culture at New York University, Sinan Antoon is one of the most important contemporary authors in the Arab literary scene today. Long- and short-listed for the Arabic Booker prize for his novels *Fihris/ The Baghdad Eucharist* (2016) and *Ya Maryam/ Ave Maria* (2013), and winner of the Prix de la Littérature Arabe for the French translation of his novel *Wahdaha Shajarat Alrumman* (*The Corpse Washer*) (tran. Layla Mansour), Sinan Antoon's novels, poetry collections and translations have been recognized by many other awarding bodies both within and beyond the Arab World and the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa). As a writer and a translator, Antoon's work has received a considerable amount of attention, be it his poetry collections, his novels, or his translation of eminent Arab poets such as Mahmoud Darwish, Saadi Youssef, or Sargon Boulus. While the majority of his writing has been translated by other translators, Antoon undertook the translation of his second novel, published in English as *The Corpse Washer*, a decision that has never been placed under the spotlight of academic study thus far. With this in mind, I ask Antoon in this interview about his status as a writer who translates himself for the empire and why he describes this status as that of being "a barbarian in Rome". Throughout a discussion of strategies of translating his own work as he sees them, this interview offers insight into the author's double presence in two disparate literatures. It sheds light on the creative process of writing and translating in different cultural contexts, as well as the influence of that context on the self-translation of a given work.

2. The Interview

B.A: Dr. Antoon, I would like to focus on translation in this interview; my question is therefore for Sinan Antoon the translator. You used an expression that really attracted my attention in your novel Fihris, the expression "translated it to ruins" (about a missile that destroyed a building).

The usage of the verb "translate" to transform things to ruins drew my attention. What is left of the literary work after translation?

S.A: It's a good question because you asked "what is left?" Questions traditionally focus on what is lost. The expression "translator, traitor" is poetic and beautiful but in my opinion, a lot is left after translation. The majority of the readers of a translation do not know the language of the original text and as a result don't know what was lost, but what is left is a lot. The way I perceive translation is that of a constant state of transfer that we live in. Not only between the mother tongue and another language, but even as we speak our native language we are already translating. That's why in most of the languages of the world there are expressions that are equivalent to "words fail me".. everything is a translation and the essence is what is left. There's always a loss and a gain too, but this doesn't mean bad translations don't exist. Translation, however, isn't merely a transfer; the translator plays a big role in reshaping the text. Translation is both a simple and a complex process because it involves a friction between two languages. I greatly admire the Iraqi poet Sargon Boulus, who translated extensively and who constantly repeated that poetry is what is left after translation. I use the verb "translate" a lot because I am obsessed with transformations, in their negative as well as in their positive sense. To me, translation is almost like smuggling across borders: One has to transfer a load from one territory to another without losing any valuables.

Sometimes I get invited to translation conferences, but I decline the invitations because I am not great at theorizing the topic. Not that it's not worth theorizing, but practice is very important and carries an aspect of mystery. I consider translation a type of writing or rewriting. One gains experience through practice, but there's a mysterious and creative aspect. It is not a mechanic process. For these reasons I don't think that Google translate, for example, can produce a literary translation; it's not entirely mechanic.

I have an American friend who is a great translator, he translates from French and Italian. He describes translation as a battlefield, wherein you have a space and strategic plans. We're back to metaphors again. When talking about translation one moves from a metaphor to a metaphor.

B.A.: Besides Sargon Boulus, you have translated poets like Mahmoud Darwish and Saadi Yousef. Poets that come from different streams and whose translation varies in difficulty, in my opinion. To Antoine Berman, every translator has a project, whether in their choice of translated texts or in their methods of translation. Do you have a translator's project? If yes, what is your project?

S.A: I have had many projects, but of course, there are priorities that are related to general life events. Some of these priorities were dictated by my status as an Iraqi living in the country that waged war on Iraq, and the ways in which literature and culture offer an outlook of one another. Naturally, I only translate texts that I am infatuated with; I am infatuated with Mahmoud Dawrish, I am infatuated with Sargon Boulus. A friend commented and I hadn't noticed it before he did that all three poets are somehow exiled. Each one of them lost their homeland one way or the other, a lot of their writing revolves around the relationship of the poet with their homeland, being separation from it, losing it, and resurrecting it through language and various forms of literature.

In another life, my project would be translating classical Arabic literature; there are marvellous hidden treasures that have not been translated from classical Arabic poetry. Currently, the actual projects I am engaged in are translating Mahmoud Darwish's last poetry collection, as well as a complete anthology of Sargon Boulus in English; he is a poet who never got the attention he deserves translation wise. I might be the one who translated him the most, but sporadically.

I also enjoy translating from English to Arabic and I have translated selections from various American poets, especially Charles Simic, whom I admire a lot. That's another project. I published these translations occasionally in the cultural pages of Al-Akhbar newspaper[3], as well as in Jadaliyya e-zine[4]. I also started translating Toni Morrison's novel Home, but some problems with copyright came up so I didn't finish that project. Currently, I am working on Sargon Boulus'

[3] Al-Akhbar is a daily newspaper of Arabic expression that is published in Beirut, Lebanon. The newspaper describes its political alignment as independent, leftist and anti-imperialist (anti-Americanist). Its editor in chief is currently Ibrahim Al-Amin.

[4] Jadaliyya is an independent e-zine produced by the Arab Studies Institute (based in Washington D.C. and Beirut). It features English, Arabic, French, and Spanish-language content by academics, journalists, activists, and artists from and on the Middle East. It is collaboratively edited by a number of Arab authors and journalists, amongst which is Sinan Antoon, Ibtisam Azem, Bassam Haddad and others.

anthology in addition to translating my own writing, as I have decided that from now on, I will be my own translator.

B.A.: … In fact, that was my next question, is your translation of your novel The Pomegranate Alone (The Corpse Washer) part of your project as a translator? Or part of your project as an author?

S.A.: There are a few things at play here…The majority of authors experience some sort of postpartum depression after finishing a novel, just like a mother who delivers her child but is still confused as to how to proceed with her life. This was my second novel after a long gap during which I was focusing on my PhD dissertation. Its topic is deeply ingrained in Iraqi culture, and it was written during the American invasion and occupation of Iraq. In order to immerse myself in the world of the novel, despite being away from Iraq, I immersed myself in Shiite theology books and the rituals of corpse washing. In order to get myself closer to the world of Jawad (the main protagonist), the walls of my apartment were covered with pictures of the casualties in Iraq and news of death. I lived with these characters for quite some time, and when I finished the novel, I missed them. I don't want to sound arrogant, but the novel has a lot of references to popular Iraqi culture, in addition to poetry and terms that might confuse a translator. So, I decided, and this might be selfish of me, that this is my novel, therefore I am the best person to transfer it. You will probably ask me why I didn't translate the novels that followed, but the following novel, Ya Maryam/ Ave Maria, also depicts a very painful topic– some of its characters are even based on family members. Frankly, the novels I write are emotionally draining. For that reason, I avoid reliving them once more, because translation delves into the text in an entirely different way. However, from now on I think I will be the translator of my coming novels.

B.A.: Authors usually adopt different stances towards the translation of their work to other languages: Milan Kundera is an extreme example, being very doubtful of the translation of his work to the point of reviewing his French translations and marking some editions with the phrase "entièrement revue par l'auteur" (entirely reviewed by the author). On the other hand, many authors deal with translation with ease and are very detached from their texts. Where do you find yourself between these two positions?

S.A: I am helpless when the translation is into a language I cannot read: for example, my French is intermediate; therefore, I cannot really judge the quality of the French translations of my work. On the other hand, I myself am a translator from and to English. The issue is not always with the translator per se, there's the editor as well. American and Anglophone publishing houses are known for taking liberties in making alterations to texts that come from the Global South. Editors allow themselves more authority in altering texts that are translated from Arabic or Persian, for example. The translator Marilyn Booth recently wrote about her experience with editors trying to domesticate her translation of the novel *Girls of Riyadh*, and, generally speaking, novels translated from Arabic. Personally, I have had a similar experience with editors who made comments like: "This doesn't happen in an American novel" to which I answered, "this is not an American novel, this is an Iraqi novel".

During the translation of *The Pomegranate Alone/ The Corpse washer*, for example, the editor wanted to delete at least half of the dreams/nightmares in the novel, which, in my opinion (as well as in the opinion of many readers), is one of the most beautiful and focal aspects of the novel; it's the backbone of the story. It elucidates the emotional status of an artist, a non-believer, who works as a corpse washer. I had to explain to the editor that while no text is beyond editing, I refuse to sacrifice pivotal parts of my novel for the sake of being published in translation.

On the other hand, and this could be due to Farouk Mardam Bey (the great intellectual, author and translator) being the director of the Arabic literature series at Actes-Sud, the French translation of the same novel maintained its title and no suggestions of deletion of any parts were made. In English, there are always suggestions for removing parts of the text. Arab writers talk in their interviews about the absence of the editor in Arab publishing houses, and this might have reached Anglophone publishers. But the absence of the editor does not mean that Arabic texts never go through editing or that they are published directly without any edits. Personally, my wife is an author and a journalist, and she is my first reader. I also always send my writings to a friend for proof reading... What I am trying to say is that although there are no official Arab editors that doesn't mean that texts don't go through any type of editing. The lack of editors is used as an excuse by the editors of the Anglophone publishing houses–it's as if the text should be heavily

transformed to be worthy of being published in the realm of Anglophone literature, and this is where cultural hegemony manifests itself.

B.A.: Do you ever entertain the idea of publishing a revised version of your previous translations to English?

S.A.: You mean re-translate what has already been translated of my work? It's possible…There are, however, many projects that I have to put off because of other priorities. I am currently writing a novel and sometimes I imagine that my characters are impatiently waiting to know their fate…

B.A.: You have a unique profile amongst authors who self-translate, as most self-translators don't have experience in translating other writers' work before they translate their own work. You, on the other hand, are an author and a translator in your own right before becoming a translator of your own writing. How is translating a text you wrote different from translating a text you did not write?

S.A.: Even though I don't believe in the sacredness of the original text, there's an unconscious responsibility towards the original, especially when its author has passed away. I, therefore, try my best not to make any unnecessary changes, but it's a process of negotiation and maneuvering. As I was translating my own novel, I felt very attached to the source text at the beginning, but I soon realized that I am the author of the text, and therefore I am free to make alterations, so I did. Some people may think that self-translation is a rewriting, maybe it is for some, but for me, writing starts with images and scenes that I process for a long time and write in my head before actually writing them. When it is time for me to write, the details would be as complete as one block that I can no longer change. When I translated my novel, I had no desire to rewrite any parts of it; to me, all the characters of the novel were real, the events that happened took place in the past, what has been said, has been said already. It was a completed work before I translated it, the same applies for translating my own poetry, the poem would be complete in my head before being written. This is my personal experience.

B.A.: Samuel Beckett recounts, in his correspondence, the story of the beginning of his self-translation as being in the middle of writing his play Suite, when he decided to draw a line across the page and translate what he had written in the first half in English, into French, then continue writing the play in French. From that point onwards, he moved to writing his plays originally in French, then self-translating them to English, and to him, writing in French was a liberation that he commented on with the phrase: "je voulais écrire sans style (I wanted to write without a style)". Sinan Antoon, can you describe the event that sparked the idea of self-translation to you?

S.A.: Since I was little, I had the dream of writing in two languages, but when I arrived in the US, I found myself in academia without any previous plans. I didn't want to work in the corporate world, so I chose academia. This decision had both negative and positive consequences, one of its good outcomes is that my language became more academic. When I wanted to make my poetry accessible to others, I started translating from Arabic into English. I also started to translate my own novel Ijaam into English, but the American invasion of Iraq took place while I was working on the translation, so I travelled with a group of friends to shoot a documentary there. During the trip, Rebecca Johnson offered to translate the novel.

Essentially, I went through the same experience that many immigrants go through, I mean the obsession with perfecting the new language. At the same time, Arabic was what I missed the most when I moved here in the US. It was before satellite televisions and social media, and that was very difficult for somebody who loved Arabic. I remember one time I was on a bus and I heard some passengers speak Arabic, so I missed my stop and stayed on the bus just to hear more Arabic. I have always had a swinging feeling of obligation to perfect my English, but I didn't want to lose my Arabic. It's like living between the two languages. I started to self-translate because I wanted to get my poetry and novels across, but I haven't written anything (creative) directly in English until recently, when I was contacted by a publishing house to contribute to an anthology entitled "Baghdad Noire". I used to be against foreign publishing houses setting a theme and recruiting authors to write about it, but I considered it a challenge, so I wrote a short story that I haven't yet translated into Arabic. As for the novel I am currently writing, I take translation intervals every two or three chapters as my writing slows down, so I will be finishing the two versions (Arabic

and English) simultaneously. It's a novel in which half of the events take place in New York and it has a lot of dialogues in English, so it makes sense for it to be written in two languages.

B.A.: According to Derrida, our world today does not allow us the luxury of monolingualism, as there's always the thought of communicating the same thing in another language, as well as the thought of how the self is perceived by the Other. The writer Abdulrahman Muneef talks in one of his interviews about a literary genre that he coins "translation literature", and that he describes as a literature that is written for the sole purpose of being translated into hegemonic languages. Of course, Muneef refers to a genre of mediocre literature, but I want to devoid the term of its negative connotation and ask you, do you ever think of ways to render what you write into another language during the process of writing?

S.A: Personally, no. I might be too sensitive to this because I am here in the US. I follow the translation market and notice the problematic baggage that the term World Literature entails. For example, the map of African literature written in English is completely different from that which is written for Africans (and in African languages). The same applies to the Arabic language. In the Arabic language particularly, there are novels that are written to be translated, this is always clear from the title or the character mix or themes that usually resonate with some stereotypes. To me, my writing is an articulation of my subjectivity which varies from Arabic into English. Of course, a writer should be able to reach a cross cultural audience, I am always happy when a work of mine is being translated, but in essence, the readers in Iraq or the Arab region, whose mother tongue is Arabic, remain my front row readers. Maybe because their interaction with what I write is more visceral than the responses of other readers, because what I write is not merely fiction to them. Readers write to me from Iraq, Syria or Egypt that what I write, even though it is not happening in their country, is always happening somewhere very close. We forget that just as there are bilinguals and trilinguals, there are millions of those who can only speak one language, and in the Arab world, I consider these my constituency.

I want to write about other minorities in the Arab world. I had wanted to write about Iraqi Jews, for example, but it has become a fad. Writing about minorities about minorities without exoticizing, victimizing, or aiming towards pushing the right buttons (which always happens when

writing about sexual minorities or women for example) is extremely difficult. These are all very important topics but it is also important to write about them in depth, and to avoid reducing them for the sake of easy consumption of the middle-class average reader.

B.A.: …. Which brings us to the issue of representation; the title of your novel Ijaam was presented to the Anglophone reader as Ijaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody, whereas your novel Fihris (i.e. Index) was translated as The Baghdad Eucharist. I am reading from a blurb on the back cover of your self-translation of The Corpse Washer (Only the Pomegranate Tree) that reads: "The Iraqi novel par excellence". Does it bother you to be the representation of Iraq or Iraqi writers when you write about human stories, regardless of the context?

S.A.: I find it paradoxical. On the one hand I am proud to be one of the authors whose writing represents Iraqi literature, on the other we're back to the issue of Orientalism. Other cultures, especially from the Global South, are not seen as plural, and thus can be reduced to one person, both positively and negatively; Iraq is reduced to Saddam Hussein, all Arab historians are reduced to Ibn Khaldoun… etc. I am certainly against this because no writer, or human being for that matter, can represent a whole culture. The issue is with dealing, and especially post 9/11, with what I call "the forensic interest" in Arabic culture. That interest is not for purely literary reasons. Not that literature is just literature of course, it's an intersection of so many fields of knowledge, but the sudden interest in the cultural production of a geographic area always follows wars and catastrophes, as if literature is going to explain that culture. A country like Iraq or Palestine cannot be reduced to a novel. The problem is in not dealing with literature as literature, even in labeling for example. It is true that books are commodities, so much so that works of high literature sometimes get labelled under sections like Middle East studies, ethnography or anthropology.

Moreover, the way a book is received and the way it circulates is through book reviews and other institutions. After my novel *Ijaam* was out in English, I remember that one of the first book reviews that were published was assigned to a journalist who reported on Afghanistan. What is the link between a novel from Iraq and reporting on Afghanistan? Moreover, a good portion of the review was dedicated to criticizing my opposition to the invasion of Iraq. On the other hand, reviews of European novels are assigned to either a novelist or an expert on that specific literature. I try,

whenever possible, to disrupt the ideas that people have about Iraq. My novel Ave Maria would have been received much better if it had reinforced Islamophobia. However, it complicates matters. To go back to how literature from the Global South is not received as literature, I used to have an American literary agent. I once proposed the idea of my novel Fihris to her, and she replied that it was really fascinating and brilliant but that it was too complicated. She wanted a traditional arc development, some kind of "a journey." Personally, it is the opinion of readers, in Iraq and the region, that I care about the most, rather than that of editors and reviewers. These readers are genuine and truthful in their responses.

B.A.: Let us then move to Arabic literature and the map of Arabic literature. I will take off from Taha Hussein's famous saying, which became more of a cliché: "Arabic literature is written in Egypt, published in Lebanon, and read in Sudan." How do you see the map of Arabic literature today? Where do you need to make it to succeed as a writer in the Arab world today? Are the relations of centre and periphery still the same in Arabic literature?

S.A: This is a complicated question. Egypt used to be the centre at the beginning of the twentieth century and it is still important, but things have changed. The traditional maps of cultural production are no longer realistic. Things took a turn according to geopolitical changes. Iraq, for example, was under a dictatorship prior to 1991. The 1991 war (and the debilitating economic sanctions that followed, however, completely destroyed the public institutions in Iraq, as well as the social fabric and infrastructure. It suffocated Iraq and its cultural production. But the major shift recently has been how gulf states, primarily the Emirates and Qatar are using cultural production for soft power. On the one hand there's the subject of literary awards, which is problematic. I know that one of my novels has been shortlisted for one of these awards.

B.A.: … Two actually, Ave Maria was shortlisted for the Arabic Booker and Fihris (The Baghdad Eucharist) was long listed for the same prize.

S.A.: .. Yes, two. Literary prizes might have some positive effect, but their impact is mainly negative, including the high unprofessionalism in the juries of these prizes. Most of the time they don't have a clear vision or fixed criteria; prizes are distributed according to geographic locations

amongst other factors. Due to the diminishing role of public institutions in Egypt and in other places, some sort of hegemony was imposed on shaping the literary taste. Many readers would rely exclusively on long and short lists. There is undeniably a good number of excellent novels, but there are many mediocre ones that stirred scandals that took over the literary scene. From a translation perspective, these awards ensure the translation of the winning novels, thus creating a disproportionate influence on the book market quite frankly. For example, a prestigious award like the Naguib Mahfouz[5] award does not get as much publicity as an award like Katara[6], in which haphazard and very unexplainable selections happen. Not that literary awards are always problematic, but the level of professionalism in these awards is almost nonexistent.

B.A.: …You seem to mourn the absence of public institutions which, under the status quo of dictator governments, are problematic too..

S.A.: Yes, it is true that public institutions are always problematic. However, voiding the scene of any cultural institution with the exception of those two countries that carry out regional and global political agendas is a problem. It is always better when cultural institutions are less polarized. We are truly living in an age of mediocrity that is partly related to the downfall of the traditional press, as well as the extinction of literary supplements or even real literary reviews. Today, there isn't but one literary supplement in the Arab world: that of the Al-Akhbar newspaper. Moreover, the academic standards in countries like Egypt, Iraq or Syria are deteriorating. The number of real literary critics, as a result, is diminishing. Shaping public opinion about literary works has always been the role of the institution, but if we no longer have printed press, critics or academics, we're left with nothing but Goodreads, which cannot be an indicator. For that reason, literary prizes, supported by publicity and huge capitals, become dangerous, as they monopolize the literary scene.

B.A.: I'll move my question to the other side of the literary map and ask about your status as a writer in the empire. In an excellent lecture you gave at the American University of Cairo entitled

[5] Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature is a literary award for Arabic literature that is based in Cairo. Awarded annually to a contemporary novel written in Arabic, but not available in English translation. The winning novel is then translated into English and published by the American University in Cairo Press.
[6] The Katara Prize for Arabic Novel is an Arabic literary prize based in Qatar. The winning novels in this prize are translated into five languages - including French and English.

Translation as Mourning, you described your status as a writer in the US as that of a "Barbarian in Rome". As a writer who comes from the Global South, how do you see your writing within the hegemonic culture? Is writing in the Empire by itself an act of resistance?

S.A.: At first, I want to admit my privileges in comparison to the millions who are stranded in miserable situations in refugee camps and other places. I always think of Iraqi writers inside Iraq, those who only have electricity for five hours a day. Everyone is bound to their geographic location. I think of my presence here, not only as a writer but as a human being, working in academia and writing in English in a country that at first supported the dictator in my country, then bombarded it in 1991, then imposed economic sanctions that starved and killed more than one million Iraqis, and finally waged another war on the country. Today I passed by the building in which I first spoke against the Iraq war back in 2002. As someone who lives in this country, a tax-paying citizen, the least I can do is criticize the government, even if I wasn't an Iraqi. I consider this aspect of my work to be resistance. In 2002, I toured the East Coast with an Afghan American writer, a Hiroshima survivor and a relative of a 9/11 victim to speak against war. Since then, I started writing political articles in English and Arabic. The audience of my English political articles is primarily from this country. Someone could read my novels as a type of resistance, but I am very cautious about this. My novel Ijaam is about the plight of the Iraqi citizen in the dictatorship era. Its main theme is writing against amnesia. My writing, however, is in no way a response to American writers.

Often times, when I go around this country, people think I am responding to American writers. It doesn't necessarily come from a bad place. I was once asked at a conference by a graduate student who specializes in war literature, why I have a severed head in The Pomegranate Alone, and if it was a response to an X writer who had a severed head in his novel. I responded that I had a severed head because there were a lot of severed heads. I have never read a single novel by an American veteran and it is a strategic decision because I am not interested. My conversation is not with American veterans. This is due to my rejection of the notion of equivalence between civilians and soldiers anywhere in the world; a soldier chooses to be in warzones while a civilian doesn't.

Of course, it all depends on the reader. Are these novels read as resistance? I guess so. In English, they are read as a counter narrative to the prevailing narrative about Iraq in this country, which is disastrous. A lot of people don't know what Abu Ghraib is. The level of amnesia among citizens of this country is disastrous. A writer has no control over how his or her novels are read so I am not against that. I just wanted to stress that it is not written to respond to any other writing. Sometimes when post-colonial writers write in English they are writing back against the empire, but I write in Arabic… Thus, making a full circle.

You asked me about feeling like a barbarian in Rome. I don't want to exaggerate my suffering, but a strange feeling takes over you when you live at the heart of the empire that is destroying your mother country and destroying the world. Coupled with apathy on the part of citizens, including academics.

B.A.: I want to dig deeper in your self-translation of Only the Pomegranate Tree (The Corpse Washer). The English version of this novel is presented in an unusual way. In Western culture, self-translated texts are usually marketed as originals (which makes things harder for a researcher on self-translation). A self-translated work would not be enlisted, for example, under the translation publications of a specific year. Many times, no paratextual information would indicate that a self-translation is in fact a translation. On the other hand, Only the Pomegranate Tree starts with a translator's note, its title page and book cover clearly state that this work is translated from Arabic. This is a work that presents itself as a translation and does not pretend to be an original. Didn't the publisher object to including that information?

S.A.: No, simply because the series in which the novel was published is World Republic of Letters from Yale University Press, which is a translation series, and I think it was a point of marketability that the work was translated by the author because it's not a common thing. Writing the translation preface, and I enjoyed writing it, was a suggestion from the publisher actually, although I find it hard to talk about translation, because I don't have many brilliant things to say theoretically. All I have is the practice.

B.A.: You say a lot in the Arabic version of your novel that you don't say in the English version. There are many deleted parts, sometimes they're central parts in the novel. How did you make the decision of removing a part during self-translation?

S.A.: I don't clearly remember all the deleted parts, but a lot of it would be due to the struggle with the editor. There were very few times in which the editor had good suggestions; yet, many times I had to hesitatingly accept removing some parts of the novel, as I have agreed to changing the title of the novel for example. If I had the chance to republish this novel, I would surely republish it in the original title. I am very proud of the titles of my novels. This title (The Pomegranate Alone) stayed the same in French, Greek, and all the other translations in different languages. Only the American publisher wanted to change it because it was "too poetic" according to them. I responded that being poetic is only a liability in America.

B.A.: A lot of writers talk about deletions of parts of their translated novels. These deletions are often conducted by editors, rather than translators. In cases of classic translations, the translator usually gives in to the suggestions of the editor due to their lack of authority over the original text. In self-translation, on the other hand, the translator is no other than the author, which means that they have authorship over the text. Did that authorship play a role in your negotiations with the editor?

S.A.: It does, but the translation of a novel like *Fihris* (*The Book of Collateral Damage*), for example, incurred no deletions whatsoever. This reminds me of the English translation of *In Praise of Hatred for Khalid Khalifa*. I was teaching a class on modern Arab novels, and Khalifa's novel was a required reading. I had read it previously in Arabic, but when I had a look at the English translation prior to the class, I was astonished to find out that the final part of the novel, where the heroine immigrates and removes her veil, is completely deleted. So, she stays a victim that requires saving. The image on the cover of the translated version further reinforces that idea. I wrote to Khalid to let him know, only to discover that the translator did not notify him of this deletion. This is a disaster because this alteration in the ending results in an entirely new novel. As to my self-translation of *The Pomegranate Alone* (*The Corpse Washer*), and although I cannot recall all the deleted parts, I do remember that the editor wanted to delete all the dreams in the novel except for two. It was almost as bad as changing the entire novel.

B.A.: The case of Arabic writing is particular because of the diglossic state of the Arabic language. The spoken varieties of the language are very divergent from its standard form. Your novels are a rarity in the Arab literary scene, as they employ dialogues that are written entirely in spoken Iraqi dialect(s). How did you deal with the spoken variety in translation?

S.A.: This aspect of the novel was truly untranslatable. I consider it to be one of the losses of translation. I had the option of translating the dialogues into one of the American dialects, but that would have a completely different signification in the English version. Sometimes, according to the social background of the character, I chose a specific register or terms that reflected that background. The speech of a simple character like "Hammoudy" in the novel, for example, has to be identical to his background; he cannot use an eloquent register, so I simplified my word choices and tried as much as I could to use slang. My approach in English was to be flexible and to reflect, as much as possible, the specificity of the speaker. However, there was no way to fully translate that. It is sad, but this is what truly gets lost. This was harder in the translation of *Ijaam* as there was a lot of wordplay, and when I gave the text to a translator midway through my translation, I gave her freedom of manoeuvre in search of an equivalent in English. I also gave her the part I had already translated and she made her alterations on it.

B.A.: Was the publication of a self-translation a one-time step or a practice that you are willing to adopt from this point onwards?

S.A.: I have almost self-translated all of my poetry. I don't publish much of my poetry, but I have recently finished the translation of a poetry collection that was published in Arabic earlier this year– it will soon be on its way to publication in English. If I had the time, I would have been the translator of all my novels. It is definitely not a one-time step, it is part of my writing project, as I am constantly moving between two languages. However, the issue is always about priorities. At many instances, I found myself compelled to give my texts away for translation because I would be emotionally exhausted or feeling the urge to start a new novel.

B.A.: The Zairian author Ngandu Nkashama describes African authors' sense of not existing objectively in the literary world until they write in the hegemonic language, (i.e. the language of

the colonizer). How do you perceive your presence in each one of your languages? Is it more poetic in one language and rather logical in another, as stated by Nkashama?

S.A.: Despite being well read in Anglophone literature, my academic training in English had a major, both positive and negative, impact on my writing in English. Because of this training, a lot of my readings in English were philosophical or theoretical; as a result, my English became more intellectual than I would like it to be. As for the Arabic side, the influence of the readings that formed my literary identity, mostly poetry, caused my Arabic to be more poetic than my English. I had read a lot of translated literature in my teenage years, but I was mostly raised in an entirely Arabic educational system, in which Arabic poetry occupied a major role. I read Naguib Mahfouz, Ghassan Kanafani, Abdulrahman Munif, and Mahmoud Darwish, among others. I was interested in translated literature, but I was not obsessed with it. Therefore, the literature that deeply influenced my identity and formation was Arabic literature, particularly poetry. The influence of Naguib Mahfouz endowed me with what I call narration vitamins, as he writes with an unmatched ability to describe the worlds of certain social classes. Later, with maturity, came other readings like Beckett or Calvino. But generally speaking, it all started with poetry, entire novels started with a poetry verse, because poetry teaches the novelist the very structure of a narrative sentence.