

SEXUALITY IN EMERGING TRANSLATED MODERN ARABIC LITERATURE

Between Mimicking and Dismantling the Eurocentric Narrative in *The Corpse Washer*

Ibrahim Abu Elrob

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Abstract: This article addresses the question of how *The Corpse Washer* (2013) by Sinan Antoon employs the translation of sexually explicit language to present a “resistant and hybrid cultural identity.” Adopting a postcolonial framework, the article explores the kinds of literary, linguistic, and translation-related interventions Antoon exerts to provide a hybrid-discourse to the hegemonic Anglo-American discourse of Arab sexuality, particularly through the creative and conscious self-translation of his novel.

Keywords: Sexually Explicit Language, Translation, Hybridity, Modern Arabic Literature, *The Corpse Washer*, Sinan Antoon, iabuelrob@gradcenter.cuny.edu

Overview

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the “War on Terror” narrative after the September 11 attacks have reinforced the Orientalist myths and fantasies that chiefly represent the East as lascivious and violent. As a response, a number of Arab intellectuals have utilized translation to intervene and write back in English

Ibrahim Abu Elrob is a PhD student in linguistics at The Graduate Center, CUNY, NYC

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as they have been cognizant of its role in establishing “a cultural turn.” This article brings about a hybrid reading of sexuality and identity construction in the translated modern Arabic literature, witnessing postcolonial themes of Orientalism, imperialism, eroticism, and politics of representation. It showcases a transcultural negotiation whereby the Arab writer and translator purposefully mediates the sexual representations and practices (their histories and narratives) to and through the Other. The current study is primarily concerned with analyzing how Sinan Antoon’s self-translated novel *The Corpse Washer* (2013) ”voyages in” (Said, 1993) the Western narrative of the sexual to create a “Third Space” (Bhabha, 1994) that serves as a terrain for formulating an in-between self-identification with particular attention to sexuality.

The article addresses three issues about Antoon’s work. First, Antoon, the acclaimed Iraqi writer and translator of the novel, Baghdad-born and US-based, is well aware of the colonial ambition that dominated the Orient for centuries and which “its pretensions encompassed defining who the subject people to be colonized were, what their past was, and the content of their culture that colonial thought had disseminated” (Massad, 2007: 2). These colonial objectives were embodied in the travelogue writings, paintings, and distorted translations rendered by infamous Orientalists such as Richard Burton. For instance, the latter infamously reported inaccurate anthropological information and grotesque portraits of the sexual lives of Arabs, Africans, and East Asians. The following is one of numerous false and outrageous depictions of Arab women; “[d]ebauched [Arab] women prefer Negroes on account of the size of their parts”, Burton writes (1886a: vol.10, p.177). These anthropological representations aimed to exoticize the colonized populations and later to legitimize the colonial force over their lives. Furthermore, Antoon talks about “[...] a cultural amnesia in the Arab and Muslim world in terms of its attitude towards sexuality” (as cited in Omar, 2010, para. 16). He imputes this cultural amnesia to “the problem in translation as there is a tendency to exoticize the [sexual lives of] Arabs” (ibid), particularly in the translated modern Arabic literature, which still carries sexual images and symbols that perpetuate Orientalist depictions of the Arabs.

Secondly, *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon’s second novel and the topic of this article, stands out as a deliberate product of the sociocultural “rewriting”(Lefevere, 2004) of the original Arabic text. Upon translating this novel into English, Antoon applies several translation techniques that are indicative of his ideological standpoints and of his experience as an exiled Iraqi who suffered from occupation and forced migration outside his homeland. On winning the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation of the aforementioned novel, he stated:

I think of the sentence when I translate, concentrating on the mechanics while letting the poetic manifest itself through the body of words. It’s challenging but

it's beautiful because it shows you the horizons of the target language which you are translating into (as cited in Farid, 2015, para. 11).

Relevant to this article, Antoon *rewrites* the vividly sexual language and imagery that he uses to render some of the lovemaking scenes in the novel as well as the other mundane sexual subplots, which in turn align with his literary and sociocultural consciousness of the colonial heritage of Arab's sexual lives. Moreover, translating the sexual literary art has been a contested area that partook in skewing the practice of translation from its principled goal, namely to enhance cultural understanding, to objectives that are socio-politically and culturally hegemonizing, viz. colonial agendas. The article, thus, examines how Antoon departs from a dichotomous approach to translation, and instead develops innovative methods of implementing translation strategies, such as omission, de-exoticizing, theme fronting, new formalisms, etc., to carve out a hybrid space where he inaugurates a decolonizing cultural identity that finds itself in central narratives on Arab sexuality.

Thirdly, Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* could be seen as an exemplar of his entire literary work including his novels, poems, and translations¹. First, his collective work, including the current novel, tend to comprise shared elements of the sociocultural life of Iraq (prior and after the U.S. invasion) and other literary elements that buttress a discontinuity from a longstanding literary tradition in the Arab world. These relate to themes of suffering and exile, national and individual traumas, colonial and patriarchal oppressions, postcolonial identities, and hybrid literary narratives that build well on the Kafkaesque literary style. Second, Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* belongs to a growing literary canon on post-9/11 events as well as the emerging Iraqi literature on the U.S. 2003 invasion. Examples include Muhsin Al-Ramli's (2012) *The President's Gardens*, Ahmed Saadawi's (2013) *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, and Shahad Al-Rawi's (2016) *The Baghdad Clock*. This literary output is widely translated into many languages, yet mostly European. It has received great attention and robust study in the academic field and in popular culture, too, due to the shared interests and voices in treating issues that dominated the authors' ordinary lives.²

Therefore, and based on these three arguments, I claim that Antoon has, to some extent³, managed to blur the lines between the West and East when it comes to the sexual act and its representations. He does so via mechanics of translation which I examine through the lens of Lefevere's (2004) cultural translation framework, Said's (1993) postcolonial theory of imperialism and colonialism, and Bhabha's (1994) notion of 'hybridity' that uses methods of ambivalence, enunciation, and mimicry when appropriating the other (Western colonial powers) which had already appropriated the subalterns' lives.

To meet the above objectives, the research is guided by the following questions:

1. Antoon argues that some Arab writers tend to fall into “the trap of exoticizing the sexual lives of Arabs” (as cited in Omar, 2010, para. 16), when there is a primary purpose of publishing erotic Arabic texts for the Western world to recast the sexual lives of Arabs. My first question, therefore, addresses how Antoon utilizes translation as a means of disrupting/resisting exoticizing discourses relating to dominant sexual stereotypes of Arabs/Muslims.
2. Antoon is entrenched in two distinct sociocultural and ideological milieus: the Arab, with all the diverse heritage that casts the representations of sex and sexuality in the Arab World, and the Anglo-American, being part of the American academia. In the wake of these intertwining influences, the second question asks how the aforementioned sociocultural and ideological constructs and literary heritages have an impact on the language he employs in his translation of the sexually explicit scenes and thus participates in formulating an in-between cultural identity.

Discussion

Carving a Third Space and Writing Back

The Corpse Washer, both the novel itself and the translation work, is revealed to be a hybrid artifact that ensures a Third Space, which is a discourse “uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them” (Bhabha, 1994: 112). The Indian postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha develops a theoretical understanding of cultural hybridity and postcolonial identity, to create a terrain for managing strategies of resistant selfhoods and communal representations. He utilizes concepts of *ambivalence*, *enunciation*, and *mimicry* that evince new signs of cultural difference.

Hybridity is designed to bring two cultures together and to open an ambivalent Third Space that can “accept and regulate the differential structure of the moment of intervention [by the subaltern agent]” (ibid: 25). Bhabha’s first concept *ambivalence* lays the groundwork for a hybrid discourse that aims to create a way out of binary thinking and differences that sustained the process of colonial domination and biases for centuries. Ambivalence serves to reevaluate these long-established prejudiced assumptions of the postcolonial identity through excavating possible, yet hidden, meanings and other differential sociocultural signs. Second, *enunciation* “is the act of expression of a culture that takes place in the Third Space. It is through enunciation that cultural difference is discovered and recognized” (ibid: 33). In this sense, enunciation provides a solid ground to reestablish

non-hierarchical relations in discursive cultural practices and hence encourages the disruption of the linear view of history, selfhood, and society. Later, these two concepts are concretely manifested through a stratagem of *mimicry* of the Other's sociocultural mechanics and signs, which later becomes a mask of authority in which the subaltern agency can be enabled. This subsection looks closely but succinctly at how *The Corpse Washer* voyages in the post-9/11 and "War on Terror" discourses to enunciate an ambivalent Third Space.

The cultural difference, as Bhabha (1994: 50) describes, is "[t]he process of the enunciation of culture as "knowledgeable," authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification." The way Antoon presents the context of the novel showcases how established sociocultural differences are re-produced and re-indexed with new social meanings and categories; the old ones either get obliterated or rather supplemented further. Apropos of the article's topic, Antoon provides new cultural identification of the sexual, albeit periphery in the novel. Jawad's sexual encounters with Reem and Ghayda' establish this cultural difference that problematizes the totalizing cultural notion of Arabs' sexuality. Antoon works out the cultural difference through encapsulating the oriental discourses and Western human rights of the sexual, and transforms them to make them representative of his own Iraqi culture. The cultural difference, then, dwells at the boundaries of Arab and Western cultures where the sexual meanings and values in the novel are (mis)read, and hence the sociocultural differences of the sexual are also misappropriated.

First, Antoon overturns the long-established hegemonic Western discourse, making the marginal the central and, inversely, striving to embody both into a hybrid, complex unity where it would not be possible to trace down boundaries between marginal and central, masculine and feminine, normal and exotic, etc. Jawad, the wretched Iraqi individual, is the center of the story and the occupation is marginal, a setting background. At the same time, the occupation is central through the presence of accumulating and unnatural deaths in Jawad's life. Death and the White man, the latter compressed into the death figure in Jawad's nightmares, on the one hand, and Jawad's attempts to escape the clutches of death, on the other hand, are one and cannot be separated. It thus becomes unmanageable for the reader to draw lines between the marginal and central or, in simpler words, between binary differences. They are ambivalent and non-hierarchical.

The first topic that Said (1993) proposes in decolonizing cultural resistance is the insistence "to see the community's history whole, coherently, integrally" (ibid: 215) by using restored ways of life, summoning community protagonists, and formulating expressions of pride and defiance. Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* patterns after Said's decolonizing cultural resistance. On its merits, the novel signals his experience of the voyage motif of the imperial quest, which had driven him away

from his Iraq. It uses the same imperial trope yet into “a creative culture revisited and reshaped” (ibid: 210). *The Corpse Washer* approaches the realities of the First Gulf War and the American occupation of Iraq as the background and context of the novel, but the narrative does not center on the unrelenting wars and the direct struggle between the occupied Iraqis and their occupiers. Instead, Antoon brings in these realities through the restored personal lives of the protagonist Jawad, his lovers Reem and Ghayda’, his family, and his community members. He also mirrors these catastrophic realities via his excessive usage of traditional texts, such as folklore songs, Qur’anic verses, and Mesopotamian mythology, as well as the Iraqi oral popular culture.

Religiosity and premarital sex are among the cultural differences that make Jawad, Reem, and Ghayda’ hybrid individuals, where they negotiate these two notions. Antoon’s novel shows that religiosity is not necessarily sexually suppressive, which is a unique attribute to the local Islamic cultures he is portraying. For instance, the character of Jawad, as Antoon shows, does not mark any contradiction between reciting the Qur’an, washing corpses the Islamic way, visiting mosques and shrines (Kazim), and attending religious events. Meanwhile Jawad does not hesitate to ask agnostic and blasphemous questions about life and death, such as his questions to his mother, “*Are they dirty?*” [the dead], (Eng. p.6) and “*There were five clouds huddled together and I wondered: Which one will carry the dead man’s soul? Where will it take it?*” (Eng. p.7), and disbelieves in the institution of marriage. So, despite Jawad’s disavowal of the institutions of society and religion, he does not seem to be a hypocritical person; he just thinks of these institutions as social structures connected to the history and culture that he lives within and are constitutive parts of his identity. Similarly, even though Jawad disbelieves in marriage, he gets engaged to Reem and gives marrying Ghayda’ a thought. Antoon is willing to show how these anomalies within the novel characters are worked out in *The Corpse Washer*, and that the term “Muslim” is as not necessarily referring to a religious/pious identity as much as a cultural difference in the case of Jawad, Reem, and Ghayda’.

To repeat, the tools of enunciating the cultural differences that Antoon applies serve to give voice to the narrator, Jawad, and to show the development of the novel’s characters within historical and political realities not of their making. What Antoon seems to accomplish here falls under what is labeled as *cultural syncretism* that links to cultural hybridity (as this article seeks to search). In the novel, culturally and linguistically dialogic symbols and mundane interactional habits are employed to index ethnolinguistic identities and community aspirations, and to negotiate social and political practices. As an effect, Antoon grows a “contrapuntal consciousness” (Said, 1993) whereby he simultaneously conceives the cultural differences of both Arab Middle Eastern and the Anglo-Western cultures,

and hence reconstructs a complex, not linear, paradigm of cultural differences and representations of the sexual.

Secondly, at this liminal space, the complexity and reflectiveness of human relationships in *The Corpse Washer* extend to the sexual act to further assert the notion that sexual encounters in the Arab world are not obscene, brutish, or disgusting with passive female partners, as the West depicts them. Antoon, through the sexually explicit language, represents agentive and self-assertive women characters, who speak for themselves and their desires, as well as the sensitive, reflective, and mundane male protagonist, Jawad. Even though Jawad is the one who narrates the stories of the females in the novel, the females are portrayed as present through the aesthetic detailing of their bodily features. On Jawad's sexual encounter with Reem, Antoon writes in detailed prose, "*Her nipples are erect. [...] Her pubic hair is shaved*" (Eng. p.1). Antoon, on the other hand, chooses to portray the living males minimally in the story, whereby the reader is left with no physical image of Jawad. The females are also central in the sexual act as they are always the initiators and co-guides of the sexual, asserting their sexual preferences. Ghayda', for instance, asks Jawad not to kiss her in between her thighs, "*[...] she pushed my head away gently and whispered, 'not today.'*" (Eng. p.151). Clearly, giving a voice to the female characters does not disprove the fact that Jawad is also an active actor as he contemplates and reflects on the sexual act.

In the sexual act, Antoon shows us that neither the male nor the female has agency over each other. They are both equal partners and creators of the sexual. Reem is portrayed as a sexually active partner whose enjoyment in the act is as important as her male partner's, Jawad's, considering that she takes initiatives, "*She pulled me up by the hand and I was on top again. She hugged and kissed me then clasped her legs around me*" (Eng. p.52) and the narrator, Jawad, does not ignore elaborating on Reem's feelings of enjoyment during the act, such as in "*She giggled and put her fingers through my hair.*" An even more complex aspect of Reem's character is shed light on in her final letter to Jawad, after she discovers she has breast cancer and suddenly takes the choice to end their relationship. She writes, "*Why? Why me? I am still too young for it. I am not forty yet*" (Eng. p.114) and then continues "*I don't want you to live with a woman who has a ticking bomb in her body*" (Eng. p.114), reflecting a deep inner struggle and contradicting emotions that she chooses to resolve with her will power as her mind wins over her emotions. Similarly, the bold quality of Ghayda's character is her clever sense of humor reflected through utterances, like, "*she laughed and said: 'I am a good girl and don't have relationships'*" (Eng.p.148), criticizing Arab society's negative view of women who have premarital relationships with a sarcastic tone, and "*'Why do you think they invented Viagra?'*" *she said and laughed wholeheartedly*" (Eng. p.152), mocking Jawad and how he sees age difference as a burden in the way of their relationship development.

The aesthetics of sexually explicit language in the novel, therefore, do not lean toward the male gaze neither to the female one as falsely depicted in the Oriental representations. “*I climbed on top of her.*”(Eng. p.52) and “*She kept rising in waves*”. (my emphasis) (Eng. p.52). The text analysis of the novel shows that Antoon negotiates both the male and female aesthetics, aiming to incorporate both into one, complex interconnectedness. In the same manner, the sexual act also temporarily neutralizes the class difference between Reem and Jawad – another element re-indexed and re-produced in Antoon’s Third Space. They find a space where they can interact without being governed by the limitations of their classes, particularly when they are naked in the same bed and their bodies are united. This happens without any sign that someone is dominating the sexual act or any violence and passivity of one of the sexual actors.

Furthermore, Antoon’s Third Space negotiates patriarchal and colonial hegemony when his characters work out social and religious limitations on the sexual. Jawad, Reem, and Ghayda’ have sexual desires that they need to articulate and act upon, but society suffocates such desires and only allows to *sublimate* them through its institutionalized language and structure, which is marriage. On the other hand, the colonial power militates against such natural desires by killing, depriving, and separating actions. The latter manifests in Reem’s tragic journey with cancer and Ghayda’ asking for asylum from a war-torn Iraq. Hence, Jawad, Reem, and Ghayda’ do not resort to expressing the sexual through overtly challenging and abandoning these structures, but they negotiate and play in the boundaries. This way Antoon works out these anomalies in the Third Space.

Thirdly, Antoon adapts Western literary forms that invoke the sexual in an Iraq torn by war and occupation, and *writes it back* (Said, *ibid*) from an indigenous Iraqi point of view. He uses a Western representational narrative for his novel as a way of *mimicking* this established narrative. Bhabha claims that “the effect of mimicry is camouflage. [...] it is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background” (85). As the colonized subjects imitate and engage with the colonizer’s culture, mimicry turns out to be a stratagem articulation of the difference since it elaborates to appropriate the Other as it envisions power. Mimicry is a force to “inappropriate” the colonial subject’s presence, and so gives it a partial recognition; it does so through the process of writing and iteration – translation is also one type of writing as discussed later. The foremost influence that Antoon draws from is the Kafkaesque literary style. He starts the novel with a surrealist and abrupt nightmare that takes place in an abstract time and place.

The onset of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1972) is a nightmarish vision, where everything seems out of Samsa’s control:

One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug. [...]

From this height the blanket, just about ready to slide off completely, could hardly stay in place. His numerous legs, pitifully thin in comparison to the rest of his circumference, flickered helplessly before his eyes (*ibid*: 1).

In the same manner, Antoon starts his novel with a surrealist nightmare that takes place in an abstract setting:

She is lying naked on her back on a marble bench in an open place with no walls or ceilings. [...] I, too, am naked, barefoot, dumbfounded by everything around me. [...] Masked men wearing khaki uniforms and carrying machine guns rushed toward us. [...] I hear only Reem's shrieks, the laughter and grunts of the men. (*The Corpse Washer*, 2013:1)

Antoon's narrative style is associated with European postmodernism in terms of creating a temporally and spatially fragmented and ambiguous narrative line. First, we notice the symbolism of the Adem-ic and Eva-ish rebirth yet into a fearsome place devoid of any physical features. Both Jawad and Reem appear to exist from nowhere, but the imagery of the "[m]asked men wearing khaki uniforms and carrying machine guns" contextualizes the event and links it back to the American occupation. This way, Antoon starts his novel by re-appropriating, or in a narrower sense distorting, the Judeo-Christian myth of Adam and Eve, and of course Eden, and writes it back, in English, into the natural point of view of Iraqis. Also, the nightmare of Jawad is written, in the English translation, in the present tense to denote a sense of "timeless present." It re-occurs at other instances in the novel to serve as a reminder of the incessant nightmarish quality of the American occupation and its ruthless costs on the individual lives of Iraq.

Parallel to Kafka's Samsa, Jawad expresses an increasing alienation from the strangeness of the events, a strangeness created by the abrupt invasion of the occupiers into the nightmare, and yet it rises in tempo. For instance, Jawad feels alienated from his voice as a result of the existence of a dominant force that suppresses his will to express himself authentically, "*I scream again, but cannot hear my screams*" (Eng. p.2). He experiences similar alienation from his body, "*My head falls to the ground [...] I see my body to the left of the bench*" (Eng. p.2). It becomes understood why Antoon chooses to represent the relation with the body as political territory, as both a relation of connectedness and alienation – a blurred representation. Antoon also juxtaposes two surrealistic images in the same nightmare, the first is a sexually charged encounter with Reem, "*Her nipples are erect. [...] Her pubic hair is shaved*" (Eng. p.1) and the other is the beheading of Jawad and the kidnapping of Reem by American troops. Through this juxtaposition, the writer tries to envisage *contradictory* images working themselves out: the unfulfilled

sexual desire towards Reem that is retrieved as a form of resistance of the memory against death and delusion, symbolized by the presence of occupiers in the scene. In a broader sense, the scene is part of the intertwining theme of life and death that is perpetuated until the end of the novel.

Translation as rewriting

As discussed earlier, Antoon manages to carve a Third temporal Space to negotiate dichotomies of West/East, masculine and feminine, superiority and inferiority, high and low classes, and past/present, etc. that have overshadowed the Western mainstream mindset of the colonized populations. He envisages a creative and enactive culture that makes an allowance for reintroducing an ambivalent sociocultural discourse on sexuality in postcolonial Arabic literature. This subsection investigates how the translation of *The Corpse Washer* by Antoon participates in formulating a temporal and changeable identity manifested in Arab sexual practices and representations.

Lefevere (2004) argues that translation is not a mere linguistic transfer between two linguistic codes, rather a process of *rewriting*. In this form, it is the translator's task to present a new writing of the source text to a target audience, particularly, of a different culture. Most postcolonial writers and translators, including Antoon, have utilized rewriting as a means to help in the evolution of a decolonizing literature in a given society. Their conscious literary efforts meant not only to delve into hegemonic discourses of the West that had constituted the canonical archive of the Arab sexual past, but also "to mix with it and thus transform it" (Said, 1993: 256). This is what Said calls "the voyage-in." In other words, the historical logic of binary opposition of dominance is overturned by a radical and dialectical "alternative decolonizing resistance" (ibid: 260), which might also "couple" – mix – with hegemonic discourses.

Antoon rewrites the novel into English to mirror a reinterpretation and re-contextualization of the tools Orientalists and imperialists made use of in their translations – the footnotes, commentaries, and summary of *The Arabian Nights*, for instance, created a re-writing of the original text for the English audience. However, Antoon insists that his work, *The Corpse Washer*, should not be seen, like a lot of translated Arabic literature – as a source that provides the West with information about the Other to step in and hegemonize that Other. "I just hope that its English version is read as a novel and nothing more, as is the case so often with 'Other' literature, especially from the Arab world," he states (as cited in *Jadaliyya*, 2013: para.4). He is adamant that Arabic literature should be recognized as a contributor to creativity in the literary circles around the world.

Lefevere calls for three factors that govern a rewriting strategy of the source text, including *ideology, poetics, patronage*. With regard to the first factor, translators should

see the role of ideology in translation as an “invisible hand,” translation as defined by Lefevere is an act of rewriting the original text in a manner that reflects “a certain ideology and as such manipulates literature to function in a given society in a given way” (Lefevere, 2004: 51). In so doing, translation strategies applied by translators are not random either, nor are the representations they create. The position of the translator in the postcolonial studies, as Niranjana (1992: 42) puts it, is “to undertake ‘interventionist’ measures to guard against the creation of colonial subjects and the exercise of colonial power through discourse.” The ideology of Antoon, as a translator, comes out due to his conscious awareness that Arab and Islamic cultures are under close scrutiny in the Western media, academic circles, and literary circulations. The linguistic and stylistic choices Antoon makes in terms of translating/rewriting reflect the involvement of a complex interaction between the translator’s ideology and the dominant ideology of the target culture. Below I examine the stylistic, linguistic, and translation-interventions Antoon applies in his novel.

Countering stereotypes via omission⁴

The omission strategy conforms with Antoon’s ideology, stated above. The deleted lexical units tend to risk reinforcing prevailing inaccurate attitudes among the Western readership, particularly when it comes to the (sexual) lives of Arabs. Faiq (2004: 10) emphasizes that “Arabs and Islam are not only normally translated into established discursive strategies, but also into the very norms of choosing what to translate, ways of publishing and reviewing.” For instance, Antoon leaves out the phrase [wahʃi:atuhu. Ar.p:71] [his savageness / brutality] in the context of speaking about Ayad, Reem’s husband, who used to beat her. Rather, Antoon gives a psychological and sociocultural profile to Ayad; he explains how the aggressive measures of Ayad against Reem are intertwined with those of the totalitarian regime of Saddam Hussein and how they embody the political status quo of that time. Despite the fact that Antoon does not want to justify this violent action against women, yet by making the omission choice and by giving a psychological depth to Ayad’s character, he attempts to steer the Western imagination away from making oversimplified and stereotypical projections on Arab men as savage and violent by nature. This ideological stance also appears in the deletion of, [ka:nat ta-taʃabaʊu bi: bi-quwa wa ta-ʧrizu ʔaḏʔa:fira-ha fi: ḏʔahri: wa ta-ʃudʔu raqbatu: ka-qitaṭin dʒa: ʔiʃa. Ar.p:214] [She used to fiercely cling to me, implant her nails in my back and bite my neck like a hungry cat.] The detailed description of Ghayda at multiple stages of her character development gives the Western reader a full-fledged image of a fierce woman. Although such a description is relevant within the context of asserting the sexual aspect of women in the novel, it might still be interpreted in the context of evoking animalistic and uncivilized representations of Arab sexual practices.

In the same manner, Antoon intervenes and rectifies other sexual material in the novel as a way to change the sexual representations of Arabs in the Anglo-American culture. The decision to leave out the following passages unravels a progressive ideological consequence guarding against possible deformations when translating them from the culture of the colonized Arab into the colonizing culture of English. Antoon deletes two passages that are read as manifestations of oversexed, perverted, and debauched Arab men in the frame of Jawad and Reem's early interactions, [ka:na ḥaḍāru-ha biḍa:ti maṣa ridʒa:l, xusʿu: sʿan wa ʔana l-kaḥi:ri:na minhum ka:nu: yaḍʿunu:na bi-ʔana-ha sa-taku:nu fari:sa ʔashal min ʔajri-ha. Ar.p:72] [Her caution increased particularly with men, especially that most of them thought that she would be an easier prey than others.], and [wa ka:nat xifatu dami wa ru:hu sila:hi: a-rʔai:si: fi: l-wusʿu:li iʔlajha. iqtanaṣto bi-ʔanani: sa-ʔaḍʿalu ura:qibu-ha wa ʔaʔtahi:-ha wa ʔadu:ru fi: mada:ri-ha ila ʔan naltahim. Ar.p:73] [The sense of humor was my main weapon to reach her. I was convinced that I would still watch her, desire her and spin in her orbit till we fuse.] As to not deform the representation of the sexual in the source culture, Antoon considers the effect of the aforementioned passages on the historical imperial discourse, especially phrases such as ʔana l-kaḥi:ri:na minhum ka:nu: jaḍʿunu:na bi-ʔana-ha sa-taku:nu fari:sa ʔashal min ʔairi-ha. [That many of them [i.e., members of her community] thought that she [i.e., Reem] will be an easy prey.] and sa-ʔaḍʿalu ura:qibu-ha wa ʔaʔtahi:-ha [I [i.e., Jawad] will always be watching her [i.e., Ghayda'] and desiring her.] that trigger imperialist stereotypes.

Creating an in-between language

It is obvious that the act of translation into English allows Antoon to create a language wherein he carves a space that speaks an in-betweenness. I define the in-between language as a set of discursive literary texts and linguistic tokens that belong to a resistant postcolonial register circulated through a creative and ideologically adapted form of a hegemonizing linguistic code, such as English. This form of language serves as a transformational account on three levels: the Arabic text, the sociocultural context, and the English language rhetoric.

Antoon situates his characters' thought structures and lives in this hybrid language (which he makes accessible for the readers to enter) through an approximation to the English narrative. Meanwhile, the language he creates does not distort the original Arabic point of view of the characters and their interiority, struggle, and the essential Iraqi condition of life under occupation and patriarchal tradition. Antoon makes the readers enter into mythological time and a fragmented history of Iraq and its sociocultural characters, and, thus, refuses the linear view of the world and the facile adoption of linguistic and ideological structures used in English. He thus builds new linguistic formalisms of the sexual, such as "Taboo

Zone,” “her in-between” and “her capital,” which are culturally loaded markers to express his awareness of the sociocultural environment of the sexual act. It is the intention of the postcolonial writer to create a language that can adopt the colonized literary text and context and can enforce their ability to play with Orientalist exotic stereotypes.

Furthermore, it is the translator’s duty to work at the level of the text’s information dynamics, as they raise awareness of the thematic structures of the text they render. Mona Baker (1992: 121) argues that the organization of the theme and rheme of a sentence is changed while translating from Arabic into English; as a result, “understanding it can help to heighten our awareness of meaningful choices made by the speakers and writers during the communication” (ibid, 121). Yet some linguistic choices, as Baker maintains, are sometimes more important than others due to their *sociocultural markedness*. Antoon’s translation identifies at least a type of marked theme, that is a fronted theme, which entails “moving into initial position an item which is otherwise unusual there” (ibid: 130). The following are examples of fronted themes from the novel, [qarar-tu ?anna azawa:dʒa ?uwa ?afdalu xajar-in min bajni xaja:ra:t-in kulu-ha saji?a bima: ?anna a-ʒajfa wa?hi:datan musta?hi:lun ma:di:an wa idʒtima:ʕi:an. Ar.p.69] [Since living alone was impossible financially and socially, I decided that marriage was the best choice among a set of bad options. Eng.p.45]. Notice how the underlined sentence in Arabic has been delayed to the end of the English sentence information structure, giving prominence to reason and justification to appear first. Antoon seeks to present his female characters as reasonable and convincing in their arguments. Also, the same notion of fronting springs in this example, [ka:na jaʕta?iru mini: baʕda ?ann jad?rubani: wa jumt?irani: bi-qubali, xosʕusʕ-an ʕala jadi:, wa jaʕtari: li: hada:ja wa ja-ʕiduni: bi-?anna-ho lan jarfaʕa jada-ho wa bi-?anna-ha a:xiru marra. Ar.p.70] [He used to always apologize and shower me with kisses, especially on my hands, after hitting me. Eng.p.46]. Antoon postpones Ayad’s hitting of Reem to the end of the English sentence.

Re-shaping poetics

Lefevere (2004: 14) speaks of another significant factor of rewriting, that is *poetics*, which he describes “as what literature should (be allowed to) be.” Poetics encapsulates two elements: one is “an inventory of literary devices, genres, motifs, prototypical characters and situations, and symbols,” the other displays “the concept of what the role of literature is, or should be, in the social system as a whole” (ibid: 26). Antoon’s role in the English version appears as a translator to English rather than an American writer in English; he recreates the lives of his characters in the Anglo-American language and literature through “the importation and

adaptation of native mythos, mythopoeic imagery, an alternate lexis, vibrant textures of idiomatic speech and new formalisms” (Tymoczko, 1999: 32). In the novel, Antoon speaks of native mythos that feature intrinsic qualities of the postcolonial Arabic literature. For example, he writes about the societal attitudes people constituted of marrying a widow; people in the novel are afraid to marry the widow Um Hammoudy whose husband never returned from war and was presumed dead, [People said that whoever married her would die. Eng.p.16]. Also, Antoon is determined to keep another mythopoeic imagery, namely the local Iraqi custom of sprinkling water when a person has traveled on a mission outside their country, [My mother insisted on sprinkling water as I was leaving, a charm supposed to guarantee my return. Eng.p.178].

In the same frame, Antoon alludes to many mythopoeic imageries with particular connection to the sexual. For instance, he keeps referring to the image of plowing, which donates the sexual act, as a point of reference to a Qur’anic narrative, “Your women are a tillage for you” (Al-Baqarah, chap.2, verse.223), [I kept plowing with my tongue. Eng.p.52]. Also, his reference to the sacred sexual service taking place in the Mesopotamian pagan temple, [The breast you so loved and called one of the domes of your pagan temple. Eng.p.114]. In this context, one recalls the Mesopotamian myth of Gilgamesh, in which Gilgamesh uses a prostitute working in the temple to seduce Enkidu and bring his downfall and awareness. Prostitutes and women at that time seized a noble and respectful position in that society and were considered an elite class. The sexual serves a significant role in the transformation of Enkidu’s identity from the state of wildness and savagery to the state of civilization.

She had no shame for this/ Made herself naked/ Welcomed his eagerness/ Incited him to love / Taught the woman’s art/ Six days, seven nights/ That time laying together / Enkidu had forgotten his home /Had forgotten the hills/ After that time he was satisfied.

(as cited in Maier, 1997: 153)

Antoon insists on seeing the sexual act in the novel as historically continuous that connects all Iraqi’s ancient and modern characters together in one complex unit; hence the readers are able to conceive a developing poetics of the sexual that is different from the one disseminated by Orientalists. Lefevere (2004: 27) assumes that the functional component of poetics is “obviously closely tied to ideological influences from outside the sphere of the poetics as such, and generated by ideological forces in the environment of the literary system.” *The Corpse Washer*

shows a recurrent textual structure Antoon follows in his translation, particularly when he encounters information about the status of Iraqi women in their society, which seems to stir controversial discussions in Western circles. Antoon weaves his ideological stance on the rights of Iraqi women, whom he thinks are under suppressive and unfair patriarchal societal norms, with the poetics he manifests through his translation. He maneuvers to link his sentences, which are loaded with a set of sociocultural presuppositions, with their sociocultural and political environment in a way that causes the information to flow as he wishes in the target text culture.

Furthermore, the act of omitting selected sexual material in the source text from the target text as Antoon displays is by Lefevere's poetics an embodiment of what Third World literature should be in the dominant literary system of the West. In order to embark on constructing a sexual narrative of the colonized, where it is contextualized and reinterpreted within a sociocultural environment tormented by imperialism, as well as in order to read and be read within the Western literary system, Antoon maneuvers to feature the sexual elements within the Western genre with "prototypical characters, and situations," as exemplified in the deletion of the following passage

[lam takun naḥi:fa, la:kina ni:sana lṣumri ka:na qad yaṭa:-ha bima jakfi: du:na ḡan jufrifṣa ila: fi: takwi:ri nahdai:n hata baraza bi-wudṣu:ḥ. kuntu ḡaqtufuhuma bi-ṣajnaj kulama sanaḥat l-fursṣa, xusṣusṣan ḥi:na tuqadimu li: a-ḡaj. Ar. p:198]
 [She was not thin, but the April of age had covered enough without exceeding but in sphering the breasts till they appeared clearly. I picked them up with my eyes whenever it was possible, especially when she offered me tea.],

and also the deletion of this paragraph

[kuntu ḡuri:du ḡan ḡuṣari:-ha wa ḡajrabu ḡabaqa-ha bi-ṣajnaj ḡuma ḡadaṣo lisani: wa ḡasṣa:bi: ṣi tas-taktififu tadṣa:ri:sa dṣasadi-ha qabla ḡan ḡasṣhara ḡahwati: kulha li:-tasi:la fi: ḡara:i:ni-ha. ḡamsaktu bi-nahdi-ha al-ḡajsar wa ḡaxradṣtu-hu min fathati ti: ḡi:rt a-wasiṣati wa ḡaḥnajtu raṣsi: ḡuqabila ḡalamati-ha. wa wadṣaṣtu jada-ha ḡawla raqbati: tas-ḡabuni: ilaj-ha. ka:nat ḡalamati-ha muntafidṣa mutaṣaheba. ḡaxaḡtu-ha bajna ḡafataj ḡuma ḡadartu lisani: ḡawla-ha. Ar. p:212] [I wanted to strip her naked and drink her lust with my eyes, then let my tongue and fingers explore the terrains of her body before I fuse all my desire and let it stream in her veins. I grabbed her left breast, took it out of the wide t-shirt opening and bent my head to kiss her nipple. I put her hand around my neck and let her pull me towards her. Her nipple was erect and ready. I took it between my lips and then circled my tongue around it.]

In these two passages, Antoon transcends the sexual relationship between Jawad and Ghayda in a build-up intimate scene that gradually leads to the sexual action, instead of making the Western reader stumble upon un-habitual readings of the sexual as presented in Western poetics. I call this sub-mechanism of omission *de-exoticizing poetics*. Hence, his characters are viewed “normally” or as “prototypical” to those mundanely celebrated in the Western sexual genre.

The last point in reshaping the poetics is changing the novel’s title. The publishing houses in the Anglo-American society play a major role in circulating a particular quality of literature that conforms with the publishing institutions’ ideological agenda and represents the poetic preferences they admire to maintain or interrogate. Lefevere (2004: 15) argues that ideological stances are also maintained by *patronage*, which refers to “something like the powers (persons and institutions) that can further or hinder the reading, writing and rewriting of literature.” The Margellos World Republic of Letters, the publishing house that has taken over to publish the translation of Antoon’s novel, is interested in bringing out literatures from all over the world, specifically the Third World, to the English-speaking milieu through translation; Margellos’ main goal is to “stimulate international discourse and creative exchange” (as cited in *The Corpse Washer*, 2013: i). These academic institutions exercise power over translated literature, especially that coming from the Third World.

Margellos’ policy to change the title of Antoon’s novel from *The Pomegranate Alone* to *The Corpse Washer* reveals a clear interventionist measure from the patron to dictate a certain ideology, which is to maintain a cultural marker of a different culture to Anglo-American. Antoon remarks on this issue that “the title should have been “The Pomegranate Alone,” but the publisher insisted on “The Corpse Washer”” (as cited in *Jadaliyya*, 2013: para.5). The insistence Antoon mentions emerges from the publishing house’s agenda of seeking to introduce the Anglo-American community to a culturally specific and heterogeneous literature, a literature that resists the ready-made images prevalent in American mainstream media of the cultural other, as well as to create a space that enables voices from the Third World to express their losses, hopes, and future. From this ideological stand, on the literary level, the resemblance of the title, *The Corpse Washer*, to news story titles found in American newspapers can be understood as an attempt to camouflage the content of the postcolonial with a less poetic and more functional title that speaks familiarity to many American readers.⁵

The Corpse Washer is a compound noun that does not serve any function in the Anglo-American culture as corpse washing is a profession mainly practiced in Islamic countries. Therefore, Margellos tries to blur the borderline between the familiar and the unfamiliar in the Western culture to encourage the readers to recognize literature from peripheries. Also, the notion behind the title change might

increase the percentage of Third World readership among the English-speaking world, especially since, Antoon (2017) notes, translated literature constitutes only 3percent of the overall published literature in America per year, most of which is written in other European languages. This means that literature translated from non-European countries might or might not be part of this marginal figure. In the end, the publishing market is governed, on the one hand, by profit-laden considerations and, on the other, by Orientalists' visions that 9/11 further perpetuated (Rabi'o, 2017, para.5).

Forwarding a new preface

Another ideological device that Antoon utilizes in his translation is writing a different preface for the English version to reveal the translator's interventionist intentions. He states that "translating the novel forced me to re-enter this world I had created, but now all its inhabitants spoke and thought in English. There were a few sentences they didn't say in English, very few" (as cited in *Jadaliyya*, 2013, para.3). For instance, he chooses not to assert the sexual as "normal" by omitting, [wa lam naqul faiʔan ʕama h̄adaṯa kaʔana-hu fayʔun ʕa:di:, Ar.p:80] [we did not say anything about what had happened as if it was normal]. Of course, this happens to avoid possible skewed interpretations that could infer Western exotic sexual images of Arabs as individuals who still live in denial of the sexual as a normal life activity, a denial that is manifested in utterances such as "as if it was normal," Antoon, thus, seeks to diverge from the sexual in the long-established dichotomy of normal/exotic.

Resistant and Hybrid Cultural Identity

Antoon's rewriting of the cultural differences of the sexual springs from the very notion that identity construction in the Third Space is created through "kaleidoscopic" dialogue. Occupation and imperialism work on the oblivion, and scattering, of the cultural identity of the occupied territory and populace; so, the latter feels a continuous sense of identity loss, and here comes the task of the writers, poets, filmmakers and folktale narrators, etc., to formulate and remake their nation's cultural identity. Yet as Said (1993) argues, post-colonial writers should not seek a flat nationalistic character but a whole and historically congruent one. They have to work out the new sociocultural signs, negotiate the past system traditions, and establish ties with new sociocultural systems that require reorientation and redefinition of their identity. In fact, this redefinition of identity cannot happen without a process of creative excavation of the Self and the Other as Burton (1886b) did in his rewriting of *The Arabian Nights*.

Westerners, such as Patai and Burton, used to translate and represent the Arab world and Islam through monolingual eyes. A dialectical process of formulating the identity was carried out by Orientalists, so established binaries of civil/savage, human/animal, normal/exotic, etc. existed. Also, to operate within this process of formulating the Other, Orientalists built their discourses on rigid stereotypical images of the Other that cannot be easily resolved. It was the duty of the Other to play within this discourse and blur the borders of these binaries, so they can create an alternative place. In fact, once Antoon occupies a borderline space between the Self, the colonized Arabs, and the Other, the Anglo-Americans, he imposes an ambivalent cultural difference, thereby positioning himself not as a mediator between two dichotomies but as an exiled translator.

The novel, as Bakhtin (1994: 52–61) argues, has the potential to provide a space for various voices and interpretations against those texts that allow a monolithic view of reality. *The Corpse Washer* charges a notion of skepticism about the nature of the Self and the stagnant views of the Other. It forces a search for identity through disrupting the monolithic voices. It incorporates multifarious voices in a single narrative voice, Jawad. His view of the notion of religiosity fights against the monolithic voice or the monophonic narrative of the sexuality of the West and participates in the process of creating cultural identity. Antoon creates an in-between construction of identity through the sexual that allows the cultural differences to appear dialogically. The (re-)production of meanings and signs is cultivated through exhibiting a constellation of voices that in turn dictates the pronunciation of various interpretations, which results in countering the monolithic and fixed representations of Arabs.

Bakhtin's concept of "dialogism" talks about a dialogic process that guarantees that the meanings of a language are shaped through "dialog" or "voicing." Antoon's rewriting grows in social domains when more people align their self-images with the social personae represented in such verbal texts. Voice for Bakhtin is a set of utterances that indexes typified speaking personas and has the function of indexing the speaker's/writer's attributes, such as gender, class, education, profession, etc. The social differences brought up by race, religion, class, gender, and ethnicity are always infused with power relations and thus participate in creating opposing forms of language that are circulated or ascribed by dominant social groups that tend to surface in what is called a dialect or a register. This is similar to Antoon's *in-between language* that he created in his translation. The sexual act is an effective sociocultural and ideological marker to the identity formulation. The political and social aspects of life in Iraq are demonstrated through the sexual language in Antoon's novel, such as "Taboo Zone," "liberating the breast," "her capital" and "a societal conspiracy." Therefore, the meanings of words in dominant languages, such as English, are always in a dynamic interaction with those in

lower levels. The struggle relies in essence on the “recognition” of these linguistic differences which in turn create an active awareness to generate new social orders with new meanings and symbolic values.

Bourdieu (1991) argues that linguistic and literary registers only exist in relation to the agents of a particular social class who give it particular symbolic values. These values are, nevertheless, defined dialectically transcending both the inherent cultural and political structures and the agents’ practices, which are in turn external to these structures. The social group linguistic pieces of language (i.e., discourses) become a commodity that is produced and circulated in this linguistic market, where it then could stop, valorize, or modify the symbolic value and meaning of the linguistic exchange. As a consequence, as Leeuwen (2004: 18) puts it, “images of others are formulated by a two-sided process in which the ultimate significance is a combination of interpretations of the ‘utterances’ of the other.”

Antoon does this by creating a Third Space as he brings the English reader and his nation’s newly born identity to question the old assumptions, and then he creates a language equipped with the necessary tools to disrupt the Western usual exotic stereotypes of the sexual. Antoon, in the temporal narrative of the Third Space he creates, ensures two important facts about the sexual; first that the sexual practices and customs are relatively universal and no exoticism is in its behavior or existence. Secondly, he still maintains cultural and sociocultural differences special to the Arab sexual environment as, “Taboo Zone” and “Not from front,” and at the same time he coincides them with their ideological and cultural spheres.

Conclusion

Through translating his novel into English and producing a temporal narrative of the sexual that unfolds the cultural difference, Antoon brings the marginalized, colonized subjects to the center to speak their voice. *The Corpse Washer* “voyages in” the human sexual rights and War on Terror discourses to enunciate a Third Space, where Antoon represents through the sexually explicit language complex and self-assertive women characters, who speak for themselves and their desires as well as the sensitive, reflective, and mundane male protagonist, Jawad, to counteract the Western depiction of Arab women as passive and Arab men as lascivious and animalistic. The Third Space that he accomplishes works out the notions of guilt and shame that are attached to the sexual act in the Western discourse of Arabs and integrates it in the whole socio-economic layers of Iraq. The article argued that translating sexually explicit language in Antoon’s novel has contributed to blurring the boundaries between East and West where the sexual becomes representative of enactive cultural resistance to the idea of death devoted by American occupation of Iraq and corrupted patriarchal values.

Antoon makes many translational choices that reflect an awareness of translation as a politicized process that requires intervening with the ideological stance of the translator as a tool. These include the omission of lexical and larger discursive units, de-exoticizing the translation act, eliminating footnotes, theme fronting and topicalization, and new formalisms of an in-between sexual language. It is also assumed that the new meanings and signs of the sexual Antoon creates and negotiates within a contextualized sociocultural sphere work out the cultural identity as an in-between position at the borderlines of the Self and the Other. In addition, translated sexually explicit language in other postmodern Arabic novels, such as *Cinnamon* (2012) by Samar Yazbek, *The Proof of the Honey* (2009) by Salwa Al Neimi, and *Only in London* (2002) by Hanan Al-Shaykh, provide interesting case studies. Another necessary limitation is that, for reasons of not being familiar with other European languages, the translation of sexually explicit language into English has only been analyzed in this research. It would be more fruitful to explore how sexually explicit language in *The Corpse Washer* has been translated into other languages, such as French, *Seul le grenadier* (2017), in order to offer a fuller image on how the novel intervenes in Orientalist and imperialist depictions of Arab sexuality.

Notes

1. *The Corpse Washer* is one among other novels that Antoon wrote about Iraq post the U.S. 2003-invasion. These include novels such as *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* (2006) and *Ave Maria (Ya Maryam)* (2012).
2. This article does not aim to provide a comparative literary analysis of Antoon's novel to literary works by other Iraqi writers and poets. It only spotlights that this novel is contextualized within a growing literary canon post 9/11 events and "War on Terror." Thus, I attempt to provide these distinctive linguistic and literary features that are the building blocks of this growing canon present in *The Corpse Washer*. Future research into this particular area is worth considering.
3. Though I am not sure how to measure this extent of success, it is evident in Antoon's increasing popularity among Western and Arab/Iraqi intellectual audiences.
4. The English translations of those parts that have been omitted by Antoon himself are the translations rendered by the researcher.
5. One reviewer suggested that the publisher wanted to go with a title that is more sensationalistic, which I agree with. They argue that *The Corpse Washer* "evokes more gory and horrific images in one's mind (than Antoon's preferred and original title *The Pomegranate Alone*), regardless of whether or not the actual washing practice is strictly Muslim."

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