Acta fabula
Revue des parutions
vol. 22, n° 9, Novembre 2021
DOI : https://doi.org/10.58282/acta.14003

Samah Selim : entretien

Samah Selim : interview

Pour citer cet article

, « Samah Selim : entretien », Acta fabula, vol. 22, n° 9, ,
Novembre 2021, URL : https://www.fabula.org/revue/
document14003.php, article mis en ligne le 02 Novembre 2021,
consulté le 07 Juillet 2025, DOI : 10.58282/acta.14003

, « Samah Selim : entretien »

Résumé - Ce texte est un entretien, mené par Léa Polverini, de Samah Selim.

, « Samah Selim : interview »

Summary - This text is an interview, conducted by Léa Polverini, of Samah Selim.

Samah Selim : entretien

Samah Selim : interview

Propos recueillis et traduits par Léa Polverini

[Entretien traduit en français]

The nahda inaugurated a wide translation movement responsible for translating a significant volume of European texts into Arabic. How did the circulation of those texts work? To what extent did the colonial system influence the choice and diffusion of some texts?

Nahda is used to describe a very broad period (early 19th through early 20th centuries) so the answer to your question would change depending on what part of this century-long period we turn our attention to. At the same time, colonialism is only one part of the story. In the early part of the nahda, translation served the bureaucratic and technological needs of the modernizing state in rivalry with the imperial ambitions of the great powers (Muhammad Ali's Egypt). Later, translation in Beirut and Cairo served the seminal project of language reform and the expansion of journalism and of the Arab reading public. For the period and specific genre that I look at in my book (the novel during the first decade of the 20th century), translation served this new reading public's thirst for modern fiction and for what in French is suggestively referred to as *dépaysement*. Most of this fiction was European and was adapted into Arabic as part of a process which I call "unauthorized" transfer in the book. Unauthorized translation evaded all kinds of power regimes, local and foreign: for example, the censure of local critics who decried what they saw as vulgar, foreign fiction, as well as imperial intellectual property regimes that continued to uphold "the original" as the summit of a pernicious cultural ontology.

*

The press has played a major role in the diffusion of novels through serialization, and therefore contributed to the popularity of the genre. However, this has not prevented the elite from considering the novel as a suspicious or even pernicious

genre. How did this genre manage to find its legitimacy and to become predominant in the region?

Keep in mind that the novel arrives into Arabic on the heels of the neoclassical revival. The literary system was undergoing deep changes in the second half of the nineteenth century: new genres, new readerships, new technologies of production and distribution. What I argue in the book is that the novel was a threshold genre because it was heir to a popular, semi-oral narrative tradition which was pretty low on the scale of "noble" genres as far as the 19th century neoclassical revival is concerned. Critics who turned up their noses at fiction, or found it morally problematic (much like their European counterparts), recognized this popular lineage. Moreover, the modern literary market came into being thanks to the novel (another sense in which it was a threshold genre) and the trade in novels quickly became the mainstay of this market all over the world. So in a sense, early Arab critics had no choice but to accept the de facto dominance of the genre. At the same time, the novel was gradually assimilated to high brow literary culture beginning with the 1919 moment, the rise of anti-colonial nationalism and of the "national literature" school.

*

In your book, you offer a reinterpretation of the nahda based on popular literature in Egypt at the turn of the 20th century. Your purpose was to distance yourself from the widespread discourse according to which this movement of Arab modernization mainly was "a kind of melodrama of domination" by Europe and colonial powers. What was the influence of paraliterature on the redefinition of an Egyptian identity and the development of a new literary canon?

I wanted to move away from the idea that postcolonial translation takes shape primarily through a rigid set of power relations between monolithic antagonists, and explore it instead as a creative and carnivalizing process that simultaneously sidesteps the spectacle of European domination and rejects the "scriptural imperialism" of national elites. In her wonderful book, *Stealing Things: Theft and the Author in Nineteenth-Century France*, Rosemary Peters shows how the novel played havoc with evolving notions of intellectual property and the moral rights of the author. The popular Arabic adaptations of the period I look at were part of an international literary economy that paid no homage to "the great European original" through which the myth of Europe was constituted. At the same time, they offer up critical or subversive readings of the reformist discourses of the period that eventually coalesced into the dominant postcolonial mythology of the Arab nahda and the "enlightenment state".

*

The case of Arsène Lupin takes an important place in your book. You consider the Lupin translated by ʿAbd al-Qadir Hamza in the 1910s to be the character embodying the transition from romance to modern novel in Arab literature, whereas in France, he reconducted an already well-established novelistic tradition. To what extent did this type of (often spurious) translations contribute to create a specific Egyptian or Arab novel?

The Lupin chapter is one of my favorite chapters in the book. It was also one of the hardest to write because it took me a while to find the right balance between narrative morphology on the one hand and a historical sociology of genre on the other. What I propose in the chapter is that the Arabic Lupin actually helps us to clearly see the romance roots of Leblanc's novellas, even though (or perhaps because) this French Lupin is written in an ironic, post-novelistic mode. Between medieval *sīra* [biography] and modernist post-novel the hero remains a hero in all essential points because his social project (restoring justice) remains intact. Doing this kind of comparative narrative poetics is a really productive way to move beyond the binary categories of translation theory (original/copy, source/target).

*

You describe the translation dynamics during the nahda as a "happy carnival of piracy"; is this still the case nowadays?

Yes and no. In Egypt there is a lot of print and digital piracy going on today in the book market generally. You can find almost anything in pdf online. It never ceases to amaze me actually. Books are prohibitively expensive for most readers (and the reading public is quite large, young and enthusiastic by the way). My "happy carnival of piracy" describes a different phenomenon, one that is both historical (the 19th century market) and textual (translation practice). Today, piracy refers to the unregulated and illegal distribution of the book, sometimes for profit, most of the time for free in the digital commons. The adaptation practices I describe in my book are also tied up with the idea of a literary commons but more in the narrative sense ("stories belong to no one"). Today translation is a highly regulated practice based on the principle of strict adherence to the letter of the text, and adaptation mostly refers now only to inter-media transfer (text to film for example, or film to video-game).

*

If translation policy remains dependant on the post-colonial context, what about academic research? You yourself write in English rather than in Arabic; what effect does this have on your thinking or on the diffusion of the works you write about?

Egyptian Arabic is my mother tongue since this is the language I first learned to speak, intimate and homely. English is my father tongue since this is the language of my education; of my decades-old love affair with books and ideas, and with language itself. Of course I recognize that my writing in English is part of a deeply problematic hierarchy of knowledge production where scholarship produced in a handful of western European languages (English mostly but also French and German) is valued more than Arabic language scholarship. The latter isn't included in promotion criteria at US universities. Egyptian universities on the other hand require at least one or two publications in accredited English language journals for promotion. In Egypt the university system is in shambles. Scholars and students have extremely limited access to the publications, research tools, funding avenues and travel opportunities we take for granted in the US for example. Academic freedom of speech is severely restricted. All of this contributes to the marginalization of national scholarship on the global stage. On the other hand scholars writing in English need to engage more deeply and consistently with Arabic language scholarship in their work. Twenty years ago you might have come across a monograph on modern Arab history or literature that didn't cite a single Arabic secondary source. While today this is no longer the case, there are still gaps in foreign scholars' understanding of contemporary disciplines and debates in the Arab world, both in and out of academic settings. Translation plays a very important role here too. I rely on my translator comrades to introduce my own work to Egyptian and Arab readers. I would definitely like to see more translation of contemporary research and seminal works in the humanities from Arabic to English and other European languages.

*

You point out the importance of female characters in late 19th and early 20th century novels, which is inversely proportional to the poor visibility they had in social space. Why do you think that is? The rise of Egyptian feminism was partly nourished by literature – I am thinking in particular of the work of Nawal el-Saadawi, who died recently – but female figures were also often used as the symbolic capital of the colonised or reborn nation (take, for example, the famous statue of Mahmoud Mokhtar, *Nahdat Misr*; there also are countless references to women as "mothers of the nation", or to Egypt itself as "mother of the world"…).

Yes, the “national feminine” that you describe here is one of the major tropes of twentieth century literature and visual art in Egypt. What’s interesting about the period I explore in my book is that this trope had not yet been fully developed and deployed by national elites. So the adaptations and authored novels I look at take varying attitudes towards their leading female characters. Reformists, male and female, were grappling with a host of urgent issues related to the “new woman”. Cloistering, veiling, public mobility and visibility, work, education, family law: everything was up for debate during this period and the eventual trope of “mother of the Egyptian family” had not yet solidified. The novels reflect this openness and instability in fascinating and often quite startling ways.

*

We remember the terrible fire that annihilated the manuscripts of the Egyptian Institute in Cairo in 2011: between the destruction, the difficult accessibility, the absent or poor referencing of many books, the Egyptian literary legacy, and more broadly the Arab one, suffers from a certain “mal d’archive”. What impact does this have on the constitution of a collective memory?

I wrote a bit about this in the epilogue to the book. I wanted to tie my own experience of working in the Egyptian National Library to the region-wide phenomenon of historical erasure. Both imperialism and fascism depend on the bleeding of the archive and the dismantling of collective memory. We see this happening at a very fast pace in Egypt with regards to the 2011 uprising. In the book I propose that “nahda” came to be defined and deployed by the postcolonial Egyptian state and its cultural organs as a hegemonic and reactionary discourse about modernity. The archive is a place of infinite possibility; a place from which all kinds of challenges to official history can be mounted. Challenges like this are about shaping the future as much as they are about discovering the past. This is why to me – and to so many writers from Borges to Mohammad Rabie – the archive is an awesome and magical place.

*

The 2011 revolution led to a new questioning and redefining of Egyptian identity, which is still going on. Many authors such as Mohammad Rabie, Ezzedine Fishere, Ahdaf Soueif or Alaa el-Aswany have turned it into a new novelistic playground, where the urban space (and again, mostly Cairo) is of considerable significance. Would you say that it is a possible future for the Egyptian novel?

I'm not sure I agree that the 2011 revolution has transformed the literary field in Egypt. I do think though that it has produced some wonderfully innovative novels. Mohammad Rabie's *Otared* (2015) is an example, as is Ahmed Awni's *Ǧawāʾiz lil-ābṭāl* (2018). What's remarkable to me is that there has actually been very little fiction about the revolution published over the last decade. For example, none of the Egyptian novels submitted to the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature over the past two years when I was a jury member took up the subject or touched on it. My feeling is that this has to do with the collective trauma induced by the rapid rise of fascism in Egypt following the Rabaa massacre of 2013. So many writers and intellectuals behind bars or living in exile: is it possible to write about the revolution (or much of anything at all) in such conditions?

PLAN

AUTEUR