

ARABIC LITERATURE IN SWEDEN AND NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES: A CRITICAL STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

With over 400 million speakers, Arabic is the fifth most spoken language in the world.¹ It is spoken in 60 countries, and it is the official or co-official language of 24 countries. Owing to the fact that most Nordic countries (except Finland) consider gathering official language statistics as ethnic registration², there are no extensive calculations on which to base the total number of Arabic speakers in the whole region³. However, several studies and national immigration statistics indicate that Arabic is one of the major spoken languages in many Nordic countries like Sweden today.

ARABIC LANGUAGE & LITERATURE

An old Arab saying, “Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, and Baghdad reads” which has been widely expressed in the past to elucidate the global circle of literary activities in the Arab world. After decades of continuing catastrophes, like, civil confrontations, autocracies, economic and political discriminations and mass migration, the triangular Cairo-Beirut-Baghdad network has turned antiquated. Today, an Arabic book of poetry, prose or literary criticism could be written in Tampere, published in Milano and translated into several languages, awarded with the PEN Prize in London, and censored in Jordan and most of the Gulf States. In their search for social and economic justice and prosperity, many Arabic speakers have found refuge in Nordic countries. It is from such circumstances that Arabic literature has been written and published in the Nordic region and crossed multiple genres for the last three decades.

¹ Noack, R. & Gamio, L. “The world’s languages, in 7 maps and charts”, Washingtonpost.com, 23 April 2015

² Radio Sweden (2016) “Arabic soon Sweden’s second language”. 5 April 2016

<http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2054&artikel=6404320>

³ Korhonen, O. (2017) Multilingualmonth.org, 17 February 2015

A recent Swedish study conducted in 2016 by Mikael Parkvall, a linguist at Stockholm University, estimates that there are over 200000 native Arabic speakers in Sweden, which makes Arabic the country's second most spoken language.⁴ Parkvall's study also suggests that Arabic is the second most spoken language in Denmark.⁵ Meanwhile, the number of Arabic speakers in Finland in 2015 was 16 713, ranking it as the sixth most spoken language after Finnish, Swedish, Russian, Estonian, Somali and English.⁶ Yet, the influx of refugees and migrants from Iraq and Syria since 2015 has raised it into the position of the fifth most spoken language.⁷ As for Norway, according to the National Statistical Institute of Norway, in January 2017 the total number of immigrants and second generation immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries was 85 696, which positions them as the second largest minority after Polish immigrants.⁸ This included immigrants and Norwegian-born children of immigrant parents from Iraq, Syria, Morocco, Sudan, Palestine, Lebanon, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Jordan, Yemen, Kuwait, United Arab, Emirates, Qatar, Mauritania, Oman and Bahrain.

The main objective of this research study is to collect widely varied information about Arabic literature in Sweden and neighboring countries.

ARABIC LITERATURE IN SWEDON AND NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES:

Even though Arabic literature *IN SWEDEN AND NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES* has been operating in an unrecognized and usually parallel platform that is rarely part of the Nordic literature scene, exceptional cases have been gaining increasing interest among contemporary literature scholars, at literary festivals and through prizes, the printed press and other media.

In 2011, the internationally acclaimed Arabic literary magazine *Banipal*, a magazine dedicated to the promotion of contemporary Arab literature through translations in English, issued a special feature on Arabic writers in Sweden. The issue presented works of 8 authors: Salim Barakat, Manhal Alsarraj, Faraj Bayrakdar, Jalil Haydar, Mohammad Afif al-Hussaini, Nassif al-Nassiri, Sabri Youssef and Farouq Salloum. Most of these authors have emigrated or had to flee from Syria and Iraq and eventually settled in Sweden over the last two decades.⁹

⁴ Parkvall, M. (2016) Sveriges språk i siffror: Vilka språk talas och av hur många? Stockholm: Morfem & Språkrådet.

⁵: Taylor, A. "Worldviews: 7 April 2016:

⁶ *Suomen virallinen tilasto (SVT): Väestörakenne [Nykyisessä asiakirjassa ei ole lähteitä.]*. Helsinki: Tilastokeskus [referenced: 21 March 2017].

⁷ Finnish Immigration Service statistics for 2017, Maahanmuuttovirasto, statistics:

⁸ Statistic Norway: Immigrants and Norwegian-born to immigrant parents, 1 January 2017.

⁹ Banipal Magazine of Modern Arab Literature (2011), "Arabic Writers in Sweden". Edit. Samuel Shimon. Vol 41.

During the same year, a debut novel *Under the Copenhagen Sky* by a 27 years-old Iraqi-Danish female author, Hawra al-Nadawi, was longlisted for The International Prize for Arabic Fiction (often referred to as the “Arabic Booker Prize”).¹⁰ The breakthrough of al-Nadawi in one of the most prestigious literary prizes in the Arab world was considered by many as exceptional. Besides being the youngest of the authors longlisted for the 2011 prize, al-Nadawi was the first nominated author whose Arabic language and literature skills were shaped in the diaspora. At the age of six, al-Nadawi’s family fled from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein’s regime to Denmark. Al-Nadawi was homeschooled in Arabic by her parents, and she was inspired by Arabic literature by the multilingual book collection of Copenhagen’s main library.¹¹

In 2014, Iraqi-Finnish author Hassan Blasim became the first ever Arabic and Finnish writer to win the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize for his second short-story collection, *The Iraqi Christ*.¹² And just recently, the Palestinian-Icelandic writer Mazen Maarouf won the inaugural Kuwait-based Al-Multaqa 2016 Prize for his short-story collection *Jokes for the Gunmen*.¹³

This growing interest in Arabic literature in Sweden and its neighboring countries could be seen as part of an international phenomenon. Professor and chair of modern Arabic literature at the University of Exeter (UK), Rasheed El-Enany, argues that public interest in contemporary Arabic literature has generally heightened with the more recent events of the Arab Spring.¹⁴

Meanwhile, literature scholars, such as Muhsin Al Musawi, professor of Arabic Literature at Columbia University, argue that the rising interest in Arabic exile and migrant literature is partly linked to the current political turmoil in the Middle East and its impact on international affairs. According to Al Musawi, the problems of migration, exile and lost homelands are now more urgent than ever, and correspondingly these questions are rising from being a subgenre in the humanities to becoming one of the main topics in academia.

¹⁰ Lynx Qualey, M. (2012) “Reading the (Sole) Woman on the 2011 ‘Arabic Booker’ Longlist: Hawra al-Nadawi”.

¹¹ Tarbush, S. (2011) “The Only Woman on the IPAF Longlist”. An interview with Hawra al-Nadawi. In *The Tanjara*, 26 November 2011.

¹² Flood, A. (2014) “Exiled Iraqi is first Arab winner of UK's top prize for foreign fiction”. In the

¹³ Lynx Qualey, M. (2016) “Mazen Maarouf’s ‘Jokes for the Gunmen’ Wins First-ever Al-Multaqa Prize”. In *Arablit*, 6 December 2016.

¹⁴ El-Enany, R. (2012) Series Editor’s Foreword. In Syrine Hout’s: *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in the Diaspora*. Edinburgh Studies in Modern Arabic Literature. Edinburgh University Press. pp. i-iv.

Although Arabic-Nordic authors have only lately gained wider international visibility, the Arabic-Nordic literature scene has been playing a significant role in mediating literature between the two worlds. Besides writing their own works, many authors have considerably contributed to setting a ground for the practice of translating Nordic literature from the original language into Arabic. Translations into Arabic were in the past only possible through an intermediary language such as English, French or German.

The first direct translation from Finnish came out in the 1970s, from Sahban Mroueh — a young Lebanese writer, poet, and scriptwriter. Mroueh translated and co-translated several books, including the 19th century Finnish national epic *Kalevala*, which is considered as a major achievement.¹⁵ Among the earliest published direct translations of Swedish fiction were two novels by Niklas Rådström: *Medan tiden tänker på annat* (1997)¹⁶ and *Månen vet inte* (1999)¹⁷. Both novels were translated by the Syrian author and psychotherapist Yusuf Tabbakh and jointly published by Tabbakh's own small Swedish publishing company, Avanta publishing, and the Syrian publisher Centre - Essor et Civilisation.¹⁸ Both novels seem to have entered extensive distribution and were reviewed by major Arabic newspapers, such as the leading pan-Arab daily paper, Al-Hayat¹⁹. A search in the Arabic Union Catalog also reveals that the novels are available in the libraries of major universities in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Another translated genre that has received widespread media attention in the Arabic-speaking world is poetry. Among the early direct translations of Swedish poetry were the works of the Swedish surrealist poet Gunnar Ekelöf. His trilogy *Sagan om Fatumeh* was published in 1994, by the Jordanian publisher Dar Al-Karmel, and was translated by Musa Alsaratawy, a Palestinian-Swedish poet. Since then, there have been several translated titles made by several translators.

Contrariwise, some Arabic-Swedish authors and translators have also worked towards introducing Arabic literature to Swedish readers. One of the earliest and well-known examples is Lebanese-Swedish translator, author and publisher Hesham Bahari's effort in translating and publishing contemporary and classical Arabic

¹⁵ Ibid: p. 8.

¹⁶ Rådström, N. (1997) Baynama al-zaman yufakkiru fi umurin ukhrá. Original title: Medan tiden tänker på annat. Translated from Swedish by Yusuf Tabbakh. Spånga: Avanta publications.

¹⁷ Rådström, N. (1999) al-Qamar la yarif. Original title: Månen vet inte. Translated from Swedish by Yusuf Tabbakh. Stockholm: Avanta publications.

¹⁸ Interview with Yusuf Tabbakh in Middle East online (2010) (in Arabic) . <http://www.middle-east-online.com/?id=100926>

¹⁹ A book review by Al-Hayat Newspaper (2000) (in Arabic)

literature into Swedish. After studying linguistics at Lund University in the late 1970s, Bahari began, with his Swedish wife, Astrid Ericson Bahari, to translate the two Arabic works he had taken to Sweden with him.

*Tharthara fawq al-Nil*²⁰, a novel by Naguib Mahfouz, and a collection of poems by Adonis entitled *Wagtun bayn al-Ramad wal-Ward*^{21, 22} Shortly after Mahfouz became the Nobel Laureate of Literature in 1988, Bahari established the Alhambra förlag publishing company, and since then has published over 200 translated titles.²³ In addition to Alhambra, translators such as Mohamed Jasim have introduced the works of many emerging Arabic authors to Swedish readers. Some of these translated titles have been written by authors residing in Sweden. Despite these important efforts towards enabling this kind of cultural exchange, this study could not, unfortunately, find an extensive bibliography – one similar to that conducted by Petterson – that gathers the translations of Arabic titles into Swedish.

PUBLISHING ARABIC LITERATURE IN SWEDEN AND NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES

One of the earliest small publishers was the Malmö-based Arabic-Swedish Dar Al-Manfa. Founded by an Iraqi-Swedish author, Ibrahim Ahmed, Al-Manfa (meaning exile) published several poetry anthologies, including the works of Adnan al-Sayegh, a celebrated Iraqi contemporary poet and scriptwriter who went into exile in Sweden during the late 1990s. The publisher has also released a number of fiction and nonfiction titles written by exiled Iraqi intellectuals.²⁴ A web search in Arabic on Dar Al-Manfa shows a large number of reviews, literature studies and bibliographies of Arabic and Iraqi literature that contain titles published by the company in Sweden during the 1990s.

Another example of a one-person publishing company is the Swedish Visionmedia Syd, founded by Iraqi-Swedish writer Sahar al-Amri in 2003. The small Växjö-based company offers a possibility for Arabic-Nordic authors to publish their works in Sweden. Many Nordic-Arabic authors prefer publishers that operate within the Middle Eastern market. This preference is evident in the answers of the authors who participated in this study. When the authors were asked about their publishers during their residency in the Nordic region, they listed mainly

²⁰ Mahfouz, N. (1987) *Sorl över Nilen* (översatt tillsammans med Astrid Ericson Bahari) Lund: Bakhåll.

²¹ Adonis (1987) *Den förälskade stenens tid*. Lund: Bakhåll.

²² A TV interview with Hesham Bahri by Aljazeera in 2004 (in Arabic)

²³ Banipal Magazine of Modern Arab Literature (2007) INTERVIEW WITH A PUBLISHER: Hesham Bahri interviewed by Margaret Obank. Edit. Samuel Shimon. Vol 28. pp. 138-41.

²⁴ A list of some of Al-Manfa's publications can be found on ALMAKTABAH.COM, an Internet bookstore for books in Arabic <http://www.almaktabah.com/catalog.php?publisher=MANFA>

publishers in the Arabic-speaking world. For instance, the Iraqi-Danish author Duna Ghali listed three Arabic publishers: Dar Al-Mada (Damascus/Baghdad), Dar Altamweer (Cairo/Lebanon/Tunisia) and Dar Sanabul (Cairo); the Kurdish-Swedish poet Axîn Welat listed two publishers that have published her Arabic anthologies: Dar Ababil (Damascus) and Dar Aladham (Cairo); the Iraqi-Finnish author Saad Hadi has two novels published by Moment publishing (London/Tunisia); the Iraqi-Finnish author Aya Chalabee listed Layan publishing (Cairo); whereas the Eritrean Danish author Abubaker Hamed listed Al Saqi (London/Beirut).

In an interview with the study participant, Iraqi-Finnish author Hassan Blasim, recounted how in 2012 his first short-story collection, *The Madman of Freedom Square*, was censored by his publisher, the Arab Institute for Research and Publishing (Beirut), in over 140 occasions.

Another problem faced by Arabic-Nordic authors who publish in the Arabic-speaking world is the absence of efficient publishing structures. Given the problems mentioned earlier on, besides other obstacles set by the national market regulations of different Arab states, the Arabic publishing industry faces difficulties in developing sustainable and fair publishing structures. Due to the low purchasing power and the concurrence of pirated books, publishers are pushed to reduce production costs, while keeping the selling prices of books relatively low.²⁵

CONCLUSIONS

Arabic literature in Sweden and neighboring countries has been gaining increasing international importance among contemporary literature scholars and literary festivals, and through prizes, the printed press and other media. Additionally, Sweden authors and translators have considerably contributed to setting a ground for the practice of translating Nordic literature from the original language into Arabic. Thus, they have been playing a significant role in mediating literature between the two worlds, and functioning as organic agents who promote both Nordic and Arabic literature to new readers.

Due to its exclusion from the Nordic literature scene and its structures, Arabic-Nordic literature faces essential challenges especially when it comes to publishing. Consequently, many authors favor publishers that operate in the Arabic-speaking world, in hope of a better opportunity of gaining greater exposure to readership, wider distribution, the possibility of competing for Arabic literature prizes, and access to Arabic literature discourse. However, the practice leads to some essential disadvantages. First, authors and their works will be detached from the Nordic literature context, become invisible within the Nordic literature field, and the authors are detached

²⁵ Abou-Zeid (2013)

from national support structures and Nordic readers (both in Arabic language and in Nordic languages). Secondly, they will face problematic that are associated with the nature of the Arabic literature market, such as censorship, piracy and inefficient publishing structures. In the end, it is the author and the quality and creativity of literature that suffer the most. Authors often end up paying for the printing costs, employing an additional editor and suffering from the measures applied by the several censorship authorities operating in all the Arabic-speaking countries.

Therefore, it is important that future policy actions should focus on enabling support structures and facilities that would allow the publishing and translation of Arabic literature within the Nordic region. Also, it is of urgent importance to adopt strategies for including Arabic-Nordic literature as part of the Nordic literature structure and in the collections of Nordic public libraries.

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