

PROTA / East-West Nexus

An Arabic Intercultural Breakthrough

Translation is one of the many fields in which Palestinian writers of the 20th century excelled. Some of these translators were talented in other various literary domains in addition to translation, like poetry, literary criticism, essays, etc. Among these translators/writers we may mention: Ihsan Abbas, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, and Salma al-Khadra Jayyusi, to give a few examples.

What distinguishes Salma Jayyusi from other brilliant names in the list of Palestinian and Arab translators/writers who used to translate into Arabic, distinguishes her also from translators who used to translate from Arabic i.e. her monumental translation project PROTA (Project for Translation from Arabic) which she established to translate Arabic literature and culture into English.

Before PROTA was established, 1980, translation from Arabic into English was too sparse and selective to give a true picture of the richness of Modern Arabic literature: the narratives were limited to few works of famous Egyptian writers like Taha Husain's *al-Ayyam*, Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Yawmiyyat*, Na'ib fi al-Aryaf and Mahfouz's *Zuqaq al-Midaqq*. In other literary genres, the picture was darker; and in the words of Roger Allen, "in poetry the situation was considerably less promising the major source being

Arberry's collection, modern Arabic poetry (1967|). The realm of drama was an almost complete tabula rasa.(1)

PROTA

The story of PROTA actually began in 1980 in the University of Texas, when a student of Salma Jayyusi uttered a degrading statement against Arabic culture, to which she responded by saying "I'll show you". Soon she left work in the University abandoning all the privileges therein, and started her anthology project together with Columbia University Press, with funding from the Iraqi Ministry of Information and Culture.

An administrative Board of colleagues from US and Britain was established to assist in the many tasks of the project; translators in US, Britain and the Arab World were commissioned to do the task of translation; the adopted methodology was employing two translators – one to translate the Arabic text, accurately as possible, into English, and another one to polish it up for a foreign readership; this collaboration with a creative writer that endows the text with stylistic and aesthetic touches is the basis of the methodology used by PROTA which proved to be a great success.

In a little more than a decade, PROTA produced many anthologies and individual works, a sample of which is the following:

- The literature of Modern Arabia (1988).

- Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology (1987).
- Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature (1992).
- The Secret Life of Saeed the Ill-fated Pessoptimist, by Emile Habiby (1982).
- Wild Thorns, by Sahar Khalifa (1986).
- All That's left to You, by Ghassan Kanafani (1990).
- Fragments of Memory, by Hanna Mina (1993).
- Prairies of Fever, by Ibrahim Nasrallah (1993).
- A Balcony over the Fakihani, by Liyanah Badr (1993).

East – West Nexus

A new stage in the development of the Project took place in 1992, when Salma Jayyusi decided to extend it by adding an ad hoc program: East West Link for making cultural studies, in English, on Arabic cultural topics and aspects which Salma deemed worthy of being introduced to the West.

The first produce of East-West Nexus was "Legacy of Moslem Spain", a large volume written by 42 world scholars celebrating the glories of Andalusian culture in an appropriate international fashion. The book was financed by the Aga Khan Foundation which was also renovating an Arab mansion in Granada at that time. The book was a great success which encouraged Salma to continue work in issuing other valuable books on Arabic culture

including "Jerusalem in Ancient History and Tradition" and many others.

The Project was met with high acceptability from many publishing houses, but it couldn't have achieved the great success it had without the insistence, perseverance of Salma and her firm belief in the view that culture is the only means that Arabs may employ to join the modern world, which she expressed most beautifully in saying, " In my view there is no more demanding work that deserves our dedicated collaborative efforts at the present time than inter-cultural understanding"

No less important, in her intent on publishing these inter-cultural studies, is the ignorance, most probably a deliberate one, by Western orientalist and writers of the Arabic culture as is clear in "The City in History" by Lewis Mumford, which she cited as a shameless example in that respect who totally ignored Cordova, Seville, Fez and other Islamic cities throughout history.

What's more is that Salma defended the idea that Arabs were forerunners in creating certain literary genres, namely the narrative which European writers ascribe to Cervantes who actually spent two years in Algeria where he became acquainted with narratives like those of Beni Hilal and others; to this category Salma adds

European lyric poetry and sonnets which were directly affected in their beginning by Arabic poetry in Spain.

Two points should be added to the credit of PROTA (and East-West Nexus):

- a) that, by exposure of the rich modern literary produce of the different literary genres (narratives, drama, poetry) to the eyes of the western world, it refutes all the false allegations of some orientalist and Zionist-oriented writers against the creativity of the Arabs and
- b) PROTA was fair in covering the many different regions and tendencies in the Arab world, with special consideration given to the Palestinian Literature and literature produced by women writers.

Conclusions

As regards the reaction to PROTA in the Arab countries, Salma Jayyusi did not hide her dissatisfaction; when asked by Ja'far al-'uqaily about it, her reply was doubly revealing:

"Those in charge of cultural affairs and activities in the Arab world have the most inert minds and are subservient to static and ineradicable traditions that are totally disconnected from the world around. On the other hand, few of those Arab writers whose works PROTA took pains to translate had shown any sign of thankfulness to the project.

At the Palestinian level, and the Palestinian universities in particular, the question arises: was PROTA duly met and cared for? The answer is, unfortunately, no. In fact, only few of PROTA works exist in the shelves of their libraries, and also, which is no less important, no studies or research works are done on these very precious treasures.

Truly, many things can be done, and have to be done by us, here in Palestine, for the utilization and enhancement of this great Arabic and Palestinian cultural project: PROTA / East-West Nexus, the most urgent is the founding of a special body, for that end, made of the Departments of Translation in the Palestinian universities, The Ministry of Culture and interested intellectuals in Palestine.

This dignified body may have the following tasks among others:

- 1- Proposing works to be translated, or topics to be written about by PROTA.
- 2- Doing research and studies on the works of PROTA related to Palestine or Palestinian authors.
- 3- Utilization of the works of PROTA in translation courses in the Departments of translation in the Palestinian universities.

References