

## Nation and Translation in the Middle East

### *Histories, Canons, Hegemonies*

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**Abstract.** *This introductory paper argues for the importance of a sustained disciplinary engagement between Middle Eastern Studies and translation studies that would open up new ways of thinking about the epistemological foundations and the ethical effects of both fields in textual and worldly terms. While modern historiography and literary studies in and of the Middle East tend to be constructed around problematic and unequivocal models of transfer and translation (from West to East), the interest in the question of ethics in translation studies often neglects the specificity of 'other' translation histories and practices that are shaped by colonial hegemonies in the region and are directly related to complex (and contested) processes of nation-building and identity formation. The paper considers a number of such histories and practices, from the late Mughal Empire to modern Egypt, and explores the implications for contemporary debates in translation studies on questions of 'difference' and 'fidelity'.*

**Keywords.** Area Studies, Difference, Fidelity, Imperialism, Humanism, Middle East, Nationalism, Orientalism, Renaissance.

This special issue of *The Translator* emerged from a workshop held in Berlin in 2006 under the aegis of *Europe in the Middle East; the Middle East in Europe* (EUME), a research programme of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and the Wissenschaftskolleg of Berlin.<sup>1</sup> The workshop was conceived as a response to the disciplinary and institutional isolation of Middle Eastern literatures, both locally and globally. In Europe, the literatures of the region have been

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largely confined to specialized Area Studies or Oriental Studies departments, with little or no contact with departments of comparative literature and the prestigious circuits of literary theory and cultural studies generated by these departments. In the Middle East, students and scholars are often deprived of effective participation in the debates surrounding dominant trends in Western literary theory as well as new developments in the various fields of Near Eastern literature, due to lack of material access to texts and international circuits of scholarly exchange. Moreover, in both cases, narrowly circumscribed notions of national literature and the hermeneutic traditions they engender have tended to structure the analytic tools and intellectual paradigms through which literary texts and literary histories are studied and deployed in both the institutional and the discursive sense. A major result of this situation has been the suppression of large swathes of textual and cultural knowledge *within* and *between* the major Middle Eastern literary traditions, but also between these traditions at large and the major European traditions that are typically understood to be self-contained and stable fields of disciplinary knowledge. The broad aim of the workshop was precisely to foster these types of crossings through the optic of local translation histories as one way of situating the literatures of the Middle East within a comparativist framework that sees texts and traditions as porous and mobile historical and formal structures.

Translation studies as a loosely organized but nonetheless distinct academic field has grown at a remarkable speed over the last two decades, expanding into numerous disciplines like literary theory, cultural studies, anthropology and sociology and incorporating significant research from a large number of countries from what was once considered the academic peripheries of Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean Basin. While it seems that within the field itself, this broad and under-regulated reach has caused some cause for concern (Trivedi 2005, Pym 2007, Delabattista 2008), for scholars working at the intersection of Middle Eastern literatures and postcolonial studies, translation studies offers a rich potential source of critical innovation and freedom from disciplinary constraints whose roots lie in nineteenth-century positivism – constraints which have been particularly poisonous for the field of Middle Eastern Studies. If ‘civilization’ was in some sense the proper object of the imperial humanities in the long 19th century (and having enjoyed a formidable comeback in the form of late twentieth-century American inspired neo-conservatisms), perhaps ‘translation’ can lead the way in the 21st century towards an epistemological revolution in the human sciences and in the structures of power which support and are supported by them. It is my hope that the papers included in this issue will spark a lively and much-needed discussion about language, nation, power and identity that can be most productively focused through the prism of translation as practice and as metaphor.

This is so because the problem of translation has become increasingly central to critical reflections on modernity and – I believe – is particularly

relevant to Middle Eastern Studies, where the region's modernity has been historically and discursively structured precisely in terms of a larger project of 'translation' of European technologies, cultural practices and epistemologies – and moreover, within a field of power that marks anything less than strict equivalence as a sign of ontological backwardness and alterity, or even of barbarity (Basnett and Trivedi 1999, Selim 2007). The paradigm has powerful intellectual but also political consequences for the field as for the region at large. On the scholarly level it has served to prop up the ailing structures of positivism and of Enlightenment Universalism more generally, long after their dismantlement by post-structuralism and postmodernism in Europe itself. On the political level, it has led to violent assertions of difference that produce the kinds of fundamentalisms we are familiar with today, and which allowed the Bush regime to wage war in the region in the name of seemingly absolute and *untranslatable* concepts like democracy and feminism. This is, after all, the double gesture of a polemic like Bernard Lewis' bestselling *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (2002), which identified the region's 'failed' modernity exactly as a failed project of translation. Not incidentally, Lewis was himself one of the major architects of the current American occupation of Iraq (Buruma 2004).

It is precisely in the wake of this twentieth-century neo-colonial and neo-conservative context that western scholars have returned with fresh urgency to the question of the ethics of translation in a globalized world order supported by Anglo-American cultural and linguistic hegemony. This critique of ethnocentrism, and the renewed interest in the theorization of cultural and linguistic difference, is the central axis of many of the essays in Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood's collection *Nation, Language and the Ethics of Translation* (2005), for example. The project is of course a vital one, and yet, as the essays in the present issue suggest, both historically and geo-politically contingent. The object of a humane ethics of translation is the figure of the (native or aboriginal) 'other', and the European subject remains its universal point of reference. What happens to this ethical project and its associated strategies of intimacy, surrender, fidelity or foreignization when the translating subject becomes the translated text? In other words, how have translators in 'other' cultures (in this case those of the Middle East), and the various regimes that support or disown them, negotiated the question of difference in a historical context where difference ("this telos called humanism", Staten 2005:121) was and continues to be wielded as a disciplinary arm in the form of imperialism and development discourses and marketed as a universal object of desire under the title of 'civilization'? "What if", as Henry Staten asks, "ethical principle, be it as humane as you like, and historical reality are bound together so indissolubly that the purity of ethical principle will always turn out to be a deluded idealization?" (*ibid.*:124). The *ethical* question, "how much of the 'otherness' of the 'foreign' should the translator highlight" (Bermann 2005:5), appears in this case to be a necessary, but nonetheless provincial one.

In the region itself, translation lies at an equally complex intersection of social, political and historical interests and concerns. The literary canons and cultural discourses generated by the modern nation-state are rooted in a history of selective translation practices shaped by imperialism, domestic markets and state interventions. From French and English to Russian, and the languages of the Soviet Bloc – but also intraregional translational languages like Arabic, Persian and Ottoman Turkish – competing visions of modernity have been mobilized and contested by different actors at different moments of the 19th and 20th centuries. From at least the end of the 19th century and the various ‘renaissances’ or reform movements in Turkey, Iran and the Arab World, these waves of translation activity have produced persistent political and cultural anxieties about national identity and about the subject as a kind of ‘translated’ or inauthentic self. What we now call globalization has of course accelerated and transformed this process. Global English – and the various scientific and service technologies associated with it – has shifted the terms of translation transactions from the weighty cultural and political investments of the 20th century – ‘humanism’ – to the market-driven concerns of the 21st. Today’s Salafi activists are equally at ease with their purist and archaic theologies as they are with the latest software languages and technologies, while the MTV-style music video has become a popular instrument of middle-class religious revivalism.

Nonetheless, debates and controversies generated by both historical and contemporary translation moments at the national level provide important insights into cultural and socio-political tensions, permeabilities and resistances that lie at the core of the postcolonial nation-state, but also into the relevance of metropolitan theory to postcolonial contexts. I once attended a seminar at the French research centre CEDEJ in Cairo where a prominent Egyptian Marxist and history professor presented a long and very unfavourable review of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* and wrapped up by declaring that the book did not merit translation into Arabic.<sup>2</sup> One cannot simply dismiss this translation situation as a form of naive reception or would-be censorship and have done with it. Rather, it opens up a window onto a whole complex of issues specific to the Egyptian scene in the 1990s – from the unpredictable extra-territorial circulation of metropolitan literary and social theory to the painful fragility of the nation-state and the increasingly tenuous position of an older, nationalist and leftist middle-class intelligentsia in the neo-liberal Mubarak era – a context in which the State has given up all pretence of social and economic responsibility towards its citizens, and in which the convergence of terms like ‘nation’, ‘state’ and ‘people’ can no longer be taken for granted (Chatterjee 1993) and must in fact be actively fought for by progressive intel-

<sup>2</sup> *Imagined Communities* was, in fact, translated into Arabic in that same year (1999) as part of Egypt’s Supreme Council for Culture translation series.

lectuals and activists. Translation histories and the debates they unleash within the framework of the colonial or postcolonial nation-state open up a space in which it becomes possible to both interrogate and engage the hegemonic discourses and practices that have structured this space both epistemologically and institutionally.

It is equally important in this context to revisit classical, medieval and early modern translation traditions in order to uncover new critical optics and disciplinary tools for the field of Middle Eastern Studies itself but also as a local intervention into the field of translation studies, which is still largely invested “in the *idées reçues* of the dominant ... powers of contemporary (Western, globalized) culture” (Tymoczko 2005:1086; see also Simon 1997).<sup>3</sup> Some important work has been done here in the history of science, but much less in philosophy, sociolinguistics and poetics for example. This research path also addresses the urgent need for sustained comparative work on the region’s diverse yet deeply interconnected literary, philosophical and scientific cultures (Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Hindi and Ottoman Turkish) – connections which have been maintained through travel, collaboration and translation right through the beginning of the 20th century at least, and yet have been largely erased by Eurocentric and national literature scholarship.

The papers assembled in this issue all address these core questions from various geographical, historical and disciplinary perspectives, and moreover firmly locate translation within the realm of the political. A main concern that recurs throughout is the relationship between the State (most especially the nation-state, but also the imperial state) and translation practice. Both Richard Jacquemond’s essay ‘Translation Policy in the Arab World: Representations, Discourses and Realities’ and Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar’s ‘Translation: Presumed Innocent: Translation and Ideology in Turkey’ explore the institutional and discursive links between nation building as a state-sponsored project, translation and modern ‘renaissance’ movements in the Arab World and Turkey respectively. Jacquemond shows how, from its beginnings in the 1830s with the official translation bureaus of Muhammad Ali – Egypt’s first independent, post-Ottoman ruler – to the ambitious state-sponsored initiatives of the various post-colonial states and 21st century techno-financial kingdoms of the Arab World, translation has almost always functioned as a central axis of official ideology, whether this be the ideology of ‘development’ or that of ‘humanism’. More pointedly, he traces the contemporary history of foreign state intervention in local translation practice and networks – American, French, Soviet – as an ongoing ‘competition of universalisms’ in a volatile postcolonial environment. The question here of course is who translates, and why? Jacquemond concludes

<sup>3</sup> Tymoczko calls for the “internationalization” of translation studies as a movement that would take into account non-European and pre-modern histories of translation in order to change the field “from the ground up” (2005:1088).

that state-sponsored translation initiatives have largely failed in the Arab World partly due to the *weakness* of the national state in the neo-liberal global order; a situation in which education and language ('Arabization') policy is sacrificed to the exigencies of market forces is bound to render even the most ambitious and well-intentioned translation initiatives largely meaningless. In another context, Jacquemond (forthcoming) argues that foreignizing Arabic translations in the humanities and social sciences have contributed yet further to the incoherence and consequent withering away of Arabic as a language of science in the neo-liberal global order.

Nation-building and ideology are also central concerns of Tahir Gürçağlar's essay on translation policies in modern Turkey. Like Jacquemond, Tahir Gürçağlar questions the 'innocence' of translation, conceived as a private, occasional and transparent activity. Republican Turkey of course offers an even more radical example of state-driven nation-building and cultural modernization, since the break with the Ottoman past was so utter and irrevocable. In the first of the three distinct translation 'moments' that she explores – that of the Translation Bureau set up by the Ministry of Culture between 1940 and 1966 – she evokes the stunning problem of the newly Romanized Turkish language and the literary and cultural vacuum that this major and abrupt reform produced. During this period then, the state conceived of translation (primarily of the western 'classics') as a means of creating a new, 'universal' and 'humanist' canon for the young Republic, *Deus ex nihilis*. As Jacquemond demonstrates for Egypt, 'humanism' became the mantra of the Turkish ruling elite in the 1930s and 40s in opposition to a cultural identity that was not only understood to have withered away under the progressive and ineluctable movement of history, but that also came to represent, for these elites, backwardness and reaction: in one fell swoop it seems, the centuries old Ottoman archive was erased, and translation was sent in to fill the void it had left behind. But if translation was strategically enlisted in an ideological project by the state and its intellectuals in Turkey, it also served as an instrument of counter-ideology. Tahir Gürçağlar shows how 'explicit' and 'implicit' ideology shaped the translation output of both Marxist and Islamist publishers and translators in the 1970s and 2000s respectively, and how the failure to theorize a politics of translation that goes beyond conventional Romantic conceptions of fidelity has enabled new and pernicious forms of censorship and even endangered the livelihoods and lives of translators in contemporary Turkey.

On the other hand, the relationship between pre-modern imperial states in the region and translation practice was no less central to formative policies and politics of identity, as demonstrated by Tarek Shamma ('Translating into the Empire: The Arabic Version of *Kalila wa Dimna*') and Sunil Sharma ('Translating Gender: Azad Bilgrami on the Poetics of the Love Lyric and Cultural Synthesis') both show. The great translation movements of the Abbasid and Mughal Empires were "part and parcel of ... imperial programme[s]

to facilitate the administration of a society that was highly accommodating of linguistic and cultural heterogeneity” (Sharma). Shamma shows how in tenth-century Baghdad, networks of imperial patronage and scribal bureaucracies worked in tandem with Abbasid policy to produce an Islamization of knowledge that would represent, rather than repress, cultural diversity through ‘domesticating’ translations. Unlike the modern, Europe-oriented translation movements and histories explored by Jacquemond and Tahir Gürçağlar, which were constructed around hierarchical discourses of newness, absence and lag, those of the imperial moments dealt with by Shamma and Sharma were aimed at the revival and reworking of ancient knowledge (Greek, Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic) into “a common vocabulary of communication” in multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic societies (Sharma). Both of these essays represent a rare attempt to theorize local, pre-modern translation practice from a space outside the boundaries of the nation-state and the romantic episteme which accompanied its founding.

This is partly because modernity in the Middle East has largely been conceived as an unequivocal relationship to Europe defined by a discourse of presence/absence. Jacquemond’s essay takes as its opening premise the controversial UNDP Arab Human Development Report of 2003, which is structured around notions of ‘cultural lag’, underdevelopment and imitation; these notions were adopted wholesale by modernizing Arab elites throughout the 20th century, and in relation to translation activity at least, Jacquemond shows them to be built purely on prejudice and faulty supporting data. Tahir Gürçağlar describes a similar situation for Turkey, where an official Republican identity was exclusively constructed around an idealized version of the ‘universalist’ canons of European humanism, while Ottoman culture came to be regarded as inferior, incompetent and backward. Tahir Gürçağlar draws on Lawrence Venuti’s mirror metaphor (1998) to illustrate the poignant ontological function that translation (*of* Europe) came to have in modern Turkey: “translated works would not only serve as a mirror of foreign cultures but would also serve as a looking glass through which Turks could see their own reflection, *only much more clearly*” (emphasis added). One finds this same pattern and paradigm reproduced all over the region from the late 19th century onwards. Its roots of course lie in Orientalism and in the ambivalent identities produced by modern nationalisms all over the colonial world, but perhaps especially in the Middle East and Asia, where the nostalgia for lost ‘golden ages’ emphatically exacerbated colonial malaise .

In her essay ‘Print and Its Discontents: A Case for Pre-Print Journalism and Other Sundry Print Matters’, Dana Sajdi offers an incisive analysis of one aspect of this Orientalist paradigm and of the kinds of cultural histories it continues to produce. Sajdi shows how western representations of the history of print in the Arab world – from eighteenth-century travel writing to twenty-first-century scholarship – have been both ideologically-driven and

rooted in a kind of simplistic technological determinism which she describes as the “salvation narrative of a delayed modernity eventually brought about by the radical rupture effected by the late introduction of print”. Bryan Turner has characterized this “accounting scheme” of Orientalism as a ‘translational’ strategy that produces “a system of absences ... in which the Orient simply lacks the ingredients of Western rationality... [:] absent cities, the missing middle class, missing autonomous urban institutions and missing property” (Turner 2004:39-40). Sajdi shows how ‘the late introduction of print’ into the Arab world has been assigned by western commentators to everything from temporal ‘lag’ to an inhospitable cultural essence frozen in time. In a radical break with these kinds of chicken and egg tautologies, Sajdi insists on a scholarly re-orientation towards “the anomalies of lived history”. The question then becomes not ‘why was print introduced so late into the Arab world’ but what kinds of social and literary passages emerged from this technological innovation? Against the notion of techno-cultural ‘untranslatability’ put forward by Dan Diner, Sajdi proposes

... the movement of text across media (that is between the oral, the chirographic, and print) as a moment of *translation* in which the passage of text from one medium to another affects both genre and language in a manner akin to the process of translation from one language to another.

In this way, she is able to move beyond discourses of rupture and absence, as well as simple binaries like tradition/modernity, and instead to draw out the local continuities between modern post-print journalistic practice and early modern historical writing.

Samah Selim and Sameh Fekry Hanna’s essays both focus on particular translations of western ‘classics’ produced in Egypt at the beginning and the end, respectively, of the 20th century. Both writers are interested, not so much in the institutional or political role played by the state vis-à-vis translation activity, but rather in the figure of the translator as a kind of public intellectual with a political agenda of his or her own. Selim explores the *Nahdawi* jurist and translator Ahmad Fathi Zaghul’s 1913 translation of a work of popular sociology by the French Third Republic author Gustave Le Bon in order to highlight the common set of social and political concerns that circulated between European and Egyptian elites at the turn of the century. Reflecting on the strategic Arabic translation of imperial and racial semantics in the target text, she shows how Zaghul was able to produce an Arabic text that preserved the conservative, anti-democratic polemic of the original while at the same time re-positioning it as a proto-nationalist work, with Egypt as the exception to Le Bon’s racial taxonomy and civilization hierarchy. Hanna investigates the 1998 Arabic translation of Shakespeare’s *Othello* by Egyptian psychoanalyst Moustapha Safouan. Going against the grain of modern Arabic translation

orthodoxies, Safouan chose to translate *Othello* into colloquial Egyptian as an explicit political statement against what he identifies as the elitism and tyranny of the classical language; a tyranny, according to Safouan, reflected in the very structure of Arab political modernity and its linked conceptualizations of national identity. Following Bourdieu, Hanna reviews the institutionalization of ‘doxic’ linguistic norms in the modern translation history of drama in Egypt and offers a comparative analysis of Khalil Mutran’s iconic 1912 version of *Othello* (written in classical Arabic) and Safouan’s colloquial counter-translation, which paradoxically aims to make the text accessible to the Egyptian masses while preserving the cultural ‘strangeness’ of the work. This double strategy forces Safouan not only to tap the resources of *classical* Arabic but to forge a colloquial poetics based on a decidedly elite linguistic register. Hanna concludes that Safouan’s foreignizing approach to the Shakespearean text produces a basic political ambivalence in the translation which, Safouan himself admits, will only be accessible to “intellectuals with enlightened minds”.

The question of ‘free’ versus ‘faithful’ translation has haunted both historiography and critical practice in the field of Middle Eastern literatures throughout the 20th century. The colonial dialectic was itself built on the concept of equivalence; that is, the idea that modernity was the necessary affect of the gradual transplanting of European civilization – the end and object of history – into regional cultures. From liberal democracy to the novel, western knowledge and western humanism were viewed by both local reformist elites and European specialists as a series of fixed and ideal forms to be acquired and reproduced in the backward target culture through ‘innocent’ translation. The Arab *Nahdah* (modern Renaissance movement) celebrated translation as the mechanism through which Arab societies would achieve enlightenment and modernity. Translation then became a jealously guarded zone, relying on new romantic concepts of originality, transparency and accuracy to establish the purity of its foundations. The purified modern languages and identities constructed through romanticism and nationalism were understood to be fundamentally incompatible with popular and pre-modern literary practice: the forgery, the adaptation, and the authorless, or multilingual text for example. Moreover, anything less than strict equivalence in the translation process was considered by *Nahdawi* critics and historians to be a form of textual *mutilation*. While diverse forms of domestication (especially in ‘new’ genres like the novel, short story and drama) continued to be the norm in practice until well into the second half of the 20th century, no effort has yet been made to elaborate a post-Romantic history and theory of this seminal dynamic in the region’s literatures.

Indeed, one could argue that the domestication/foreignization debate takes on special relevance in relation to the Middle East, where Orientalism and dependency have characterized the history of modern ‘east/west’ cultural

encounters and political-economic structures. Venuti's important argument (1998) for an ethics of translation that recognizes and preserves the specificity and singularity of the other takes on curious twists when applied to non-European languages like Arabic or Urdu, which are fully imbricated by the power relations that have structured imperial modernity. In the context of Orientalism and the history of violence, both discursive and real, that it has made possible, the line between foreignization and alienation, or "radical strangeness" (Jacquemond 1992:149), seems dangerously fine. Language is, after all, one of the major sites where the proposition 'they are not like us', and therefore 'they are less than us', is made to operate, precisely through translation strategies. Bryan Turner evokes "a new form of secular ecumenicalism" as a response to this 'clash' of irreducible differences, "a discourse of sameness which would emphasize the continuities between various cultures rather than their antagonisms" (1994:102), while Moroccan philosopher Hassan Wahbi (2008:104) argues for an ethic of translation that would reach beyond difference to unpick a "shared intelligibility" without falling into the illusory trap of "cultural dialogue":

La traduction révèle donc l'universalité virtuelle, elle révèle une réciprocité silencieuse, c'est-à-dire elle fait comprendre que les éléments qui sont en l'autre – par le langage et les codes symboliques ou artistiques – sont aussi en nous et vice versa: ils ne sont pas identiques mais supposent une équivalence présumée, une promesse de relation qui appelle le partage des sens.

[Translation reveals a virtual universality, a silent reciprocity, which is to say it makes us understand that the elements that are present in the other – through language and symbolic or artistic codes – are also present in ourselves and vice versa: they are not identical but posit a presumed equivalence, a promise of filiation that calls forth shared meanings.] (my translation)

Within the Middle East itself – and particularly the Arab World – foreignization strategies are closely tied to questions of cultural dependency and linguistic collapse that continue to haunt the region in the wake of formal independence from European colonialisms. Jacquemond (forthcoming, 1992) and Tha'ir Dib (2008) have argued, from different perspectives, that the disintegration of national education in the Arab World, in combination with cultural colonialism, the hegemony of global languages like English and French, and foreignizing translation strategies have led to linguistic breakdown on the one hand and to pernicious forms of Occidentalism on the other. A case in point is literary critic Kamal Abu Dib's controversial 1981 translation of Edward Said's *Orientalism* which was, for almost fifteen years, the only available Arabic translation of this seminal work. In his essay, 'On the Translation of Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies', Dib discusses

Abu Dib's structuralist and literalist approach, as set forth in the translator's introduction as well as in the target text itself, and shows how the translator's stated aim of "exploding" (2008:36) and renovating the lexical and semantic structures of Arabic by producing 'the radical strangeness' of *Orientalism* in the target language resulted in a painfully difficult and awkward translation. Abu Dib's translation was not only largely incomprehensible to its readers, but it actively suppressed the book's radical humanist political agenda, making it possible for both conservatives and Islamists to completely misread the work and to champion it as a militant, global indictment of something called 'the West'. Far from launching local engagements with postcolonial studies or precipitating a wider, self-reflexive debate on the relationship between national identities, discourse and power, Abu Dib's translation provided an opening for new and pernicious forms of Occidentalism in the Arab World as well as further contributing to the marginalization of Arabic as a dynamic living language capable of serving its readers and speakers (Dib 2008:38).

Three of the essays in this issue address this broad problem from the angle of their specific concerns. Shamma and Tahir Gürçağlar pick up the fidelity debate with Lawrence Venuti's reflections on globalization and the ethics of translation. Tahir Gürçağlar uses the mirror metaphor developed by Venuti in *The Scandals of Translation* (1998) to suggest that the target reader's 'narcissistic' self-recognition in the translated text depends upon his or her historical position within a shared colonial modernity. If translation is inseparable from both global and local hierarchies of power as Venuti has shown, then the ethics of 'difference' that he proposes cannot play itself out in the same way for American/English readers as for their Turkish counterparts. In Turkey, it was the state and its intellectuals that constructed and sponsored cultural difference as an authoritarian disciplinary project. Tahir Gürçağlar shows how in contemporary Turkey, domesticating translation – in this case, the Islamization of children's classics – can function as an active and effective tool for contesting and disrupting official ideology.

Shamma on the other hand, considers the usefulness of Venuti's notion of domestication as a form of ethnocentric violence in the context of the classical age of Islamic Empire. By focusing on the tenth-century scribe Ibn al-Muqaffa's Persian to Arabic translation of the classic *Mirror for Princes*, *Kalila wa Dimna*, he shows how various ethnic groups in the Abbasid Empire consciously used domesticating translations to 'minoritize' the emergent imperial culture. Similarly, Sharma explores the poetics of 'equivalence' elaborated by Azad Bilgrami, an eighteenth-century Indian-Muslim poet-scholar who stood at the crossroads of several languages and literary traditions to demonstrate how Bilgrami "resolved the dialectic of cultural difference by espousing a remarkably unique theory of the poetics of love that sought to erase linguistic and civilization hierarchies". Bilgrami's own Persian translation of the fourth part of his monumental Arabic-language work *Coral Rosary of the*

*Monuments of India* (1763-64), ‘On the description of lovers and beloveds’ – a comparative poetics of the Hindi, Arabic and Persian *ghazal* – “provided a translation code that would allow readers like himself to mediate between three literary systems” based on cultural equivalencies rather than linguistic ones. Sharma shows how Bilgrami’s composition both subverted the dominance of Persian in Indian literary culture and opened up a space for local vernaculars. Domestication in this case – or ‘clothing’ the source text “in a Persian garb” – becomes, quite literally, an act of love, a declarative exercise in cultural compatibility.

On the whole, however, the essays in this issue are less concerned with the ethics of translation as writerly praxis than with its situation – its complicity – in histories, institutions and discourses crisscrossed by politics and power, but also with its past and potential as a node of resistance to “the great European Original” (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999:4) that continues to set the terms of ‘difference’ in an invisible hierarchy of knowledge and being. “[A] critique of ‘universality’” then (Jacquemond 1992:156) that, at the same time, struggles to preserve the commensurability of meanings in a larger emancipatory project. It is my hope that this special issue will point to possible trajectories of this larger project for both translation studies and Middle Eastern literatures.

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