



Research Article

© 2021 Musa Alzghoul and Tahani Alazzam.
This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

Received: 4 May 2021 / Accepted: 9 August 2021 / Published: 5 September 2021

Translation, Re-translation, and the Reception of Arabic Literature in English: The Case of Ahlam Mostaghenami's Novel Chaos of the Senses

Musa Alzghoul*

Department of English Language and Literature,
Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan,
Queen Alia Airport St 594, Amman, Jordan
*Corresponding Author

Tahani Alazzam

Independent Researcher, Jordan

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2021-0120>

Abstract

The current study compares the two translations of Ahlam Mostaghenami's second novel *Fawda Al-Hawas* into English as *Chaos of the Senses* by (Baria Ahmar Sreih, 2004) and *Chaos of the Senses* by (Nancy Roberts, 2015) and examines the reception of both translations in the English-speaking communities where they were circulated. The study seeks to find out answers to questions about: the reasons for retranslating *Fawda Al-Hawas* after a relatively short period of time after its first translation, the roles of human agents such as the author, translators, and publishers in the production and reception of the two translations of *Fawda Al-Hawas*, how the retranslation tried to avoid previous problems, if any, that hindered the circulation of the first translation, the role of paratexts in the reception of the two translations. The study draws on major concepts from reception theory as adopted by (Brown, 1994) in her study of Latin American novels published in West Germany. Specifically, the current study draws a close comparison of the paratexts associated with the two translations of Mostaghenami's *Fawda Al-Hawas* as well as the roles of stakeholders. The study concludes that despite the use of more paratextual elements as well as textual improvements in the retranslation, it has not shown better results in terms of reception and circulation.

Keywords: translation, retranslation, *Fawda Al-Hawas* (*Chaos of the Senses*), Ahlam Mostaghenami, paratexts

1. Introduction

Translation from Arabic into English is burdened by a history of colonization and political and ideological confrontations between Arabs and the West. From a translation studies lens, the translation of Arabic literature into English is seen as suffering from many problems. For example, (Said, 1990) describes Arabic literature as being "embargoed". This embargo is manifested in the number and type of books selected for translation from Arabic into English.

Book selection for translation from Arabic into English has been an important topic for studies that are concerned with the reception of translations of Arabic titles into English. This is illustrated in

the works of scholars such as (Baker, 2010) who maintains that intervention in narratives that are produced through translation does not necessarily involve linguistic inaccuracy for these translations to be misleading. Intervention yields more results, according to (Baker, 2010: 347), “by intervening in the space around the text (footnotes, prefaces, addition of visual material) and by the very selection of texts to be translated”. Therefore, book selection and paratextual strategies may be a useful indication of the ideology that drives translation from Arabic into English and the reception of these books.

Unfortunately, being selected for translation is not the sole requirement for securing second life in another language. Mostaghenami’s novel *Chaos of the Senses* was selected for translation into English twice, but neither the translation nor the retranslation was successful in translating Mostaghenami’s artistic fame or her wide readership.

2. Research Problem

Ahlam Mostaghenami was described more than once by more than one academic/media institution as one of the most famous modern Arab writers whether male or female. Since the publication of her first novel *Memory in the Flesh* in 1993, she has gained much popularity in the Arab world. The number of her followers on Facebook has exceeded 10 million people so far. This popularity led many translators and publishers to venture translations of her works into English as well as other languages especially after she was awarded Naguib Mahfouz Literary medal in 1998. However, the reception of the translations of her works into English was never comparable to the reception of the original works in Arabic. Much ink has been shed on describing Mostaghenami’s works whether by proponents or opponents in Arabic. However, very few studies have discussed the value of her work in English let alone the translations of her work.

The present study will analyze the paratexts associated with the original novel *Fawda Al-Hawas* and its two translations namely: *Chaos of the Senses* by (Baria Ahmar Sreih, 2004) and *Chaos of the Senses* by (Nancy Roberts, 2015) to understand the reason why the translations were not received in the English-speaking world the same way the original novel was received in the Arab world. The study will also compare the paratexts of the two translations to see why and how the translator and publisher undertook a second translation of a work that had been translated and published in the English-speaking world quite recently by a prestigious academic institution i.e. The American University in Cairo Press. The study will compare the reception of both translations to find out if the second translation by (Nancy Roberts, 2015) has been more successful than the first one by (Baria Ahmar Sreih, 2004). Particularly, the study will examine the role of paratexts and their influence on the reception of both translations.

3. Research Questions

The study seeks to find out answers to the following questions:

- 1) Why was *Fawda Al-Hawas* retranslated after a relatively short period of time?
- 2) What is the role of human agents i.e., the author, translators, and publishers in the production and reception of the two translations?
- 3) How did these agents avoid (or at least intend to avoid) previous problems, if any, that hindered the circulation of the first translation?
- 4) What is the role of paratexts in the reception of the two translations?

To give a comprehensive idea of who Ahlam Mostaghenami is and to set the scene for the later sections, the following section will be dedicated to introducing Ahlam Mostaghenami and her works in Arabic.

4. Ahlam Mostaghanemi, a Pioneer of Arabic Language and Literature

Mostaghanemi was born in Tunisia during Algeria's war for independence. Her father was a high-ranking officer in the military. She returned to her country in 1962, when the French left Algeria. Because of family circumstances, Mostaghanemi had to start her career as early as she was 17 years old. She started a radio show about poetry to earn living for her family.

Like other indigenous African writers who refused to use the language of their colonizer as a medium for their writing, Mostaghanemi refused to write in French and insisted on writing in Arabic although she is a fluent speaker of French, like most Algerians, and although she got her PhD in psychology from Sorbonne (Connelly, 2016). The release of Mostaghanemi's first novel in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) made her a hero of the Arabic language as many Algerian writers could only write in colloquial Algerian Arabic but not in modern standard Arabic. Mostaghanemi dedicated two of her novels to Malek Haddad, a poet who decided to stop writing at all because he did not want to write in French after Algeria got its independence and at the same time he could not write in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Her dedication reads that Haddad "swore after the independence of Algeria not to write in a language that was not his. The blank page assassinated him." (2) Ali El-Ra'i, one of the judges of Naguib Mahfouz medal for 1998, when Mostaghanemi was awarded the medal, wrote that she had "banished the linguistic exile to which French colonialism pushed Algerian intellectuals."

Mostaghanemi's first novel *Memory in the Flesh* (ذاكرة الجسد) was published in 1993. After publishing *Memory in the Flesh*, Mostaghanemi published four more works namely: 1) *Chaos of the Senses* (فوضى الحواس) (1997), 2) *The Bed Hopper* (عابر سرير) (2003), 3) *Black Suits You* (الأسود يليق بك) (2012), and 4) *Nessyane.Com* (نسيانكم) (2009). With the publication of these works, Mostaghanemi gained unrivaled popularity as a female Arab writer who sold more than five million copies of her works as of 2015 let alone illegal downloads. The official website of her book *Nessyane.Com* states that her Facebook followers exceeded 10 million people and that her followers on Twitter are over 750,000 people. These statistics, as well as news that precede or accompany the publication of a literary work, original or translation alike, are considered part of the paratexts that influence the circulation of a certain literary work. In what follows, a group of comments, headlines, and reviews will be cited to show Mostaghanemi popularity in the Arab world.

As mentioned above, Mostaghanemi received much attention which later translated into popularity throughout the Arab world because of two reasons namely: 1) her insistence to write in modern standard Arabic, and 2) because the themes that she addressed in her works were of great concern to most Arab readers. Examples of her popularity that she got upon the publication of her works can be understood from the numbers of her book sales and the numbers of her followers on social media networks i.e., Facebook and Twitter. The following excerpt is posted on the official webpage of her book *Nessyane.Com*:

Ahlam Mostaghanemi is an Algerian writer who has been called "the world's best-known arabophone woman novelist". She was called by Forbes "the most successful woman author in the Middle East" (<http://www.nessyane.com/author>).

The second comment comes from the Independent in the course of introducing one of Mostaghanemi's works in which Mostaghanemi is described as the first Algerian woman to write in Arabic as opposed to other Algerian writers such as Assia Djebar. The Independent describes Mostaghanemi as:

Ahlam Mostaghanemi is a legend in Algeria: the daughter of an activist exiled during the country's war of independence; she became the first Algerian woman to publish fiction in the Arabic language. The ensuing misogynist backlash paradoxically empowered her exilic writings, making her novels bestsellers. (Independent)

It can be easily understood from the excerpts quoted above that Mostaghanemi's popularity is a

result of her decision to write in modern standard Arabic as well as the themes of her works that are of interest for large numbers of people both males and females. The following section will shed more light on the novel in question i.e., *Chaos of the Senses* and its reception in its original language i.e. Arabic.

5. Fawda Al-Hawas (1998)

Fawda Al-Hawas (*Chaos of the Senses*) is Mosteghanemi's second novel. It was published in 1998 in Algeria and Lebanon at the same time. Mosteghanemi's first novel i.e., *Memory in the Flesh* was awarded Naguib Mahfouz Prize for literature in 1998 and became very popular in the Arab world. The novel sold 50,000 copies in the first two months, an extraordinary number for a first-time novel writer especially in the Arab world. There were rumors and allegations voiced by different media figures claiming that Mosteghanemi is not the real author of the novel, but closer scrutiny and the publishing of her two sequels: *Chaos of Senses* and *Bed Hopper* put an end to these rumors and allegations. The rumors claimed that it was a well-known male writer who authored *Memory in the Flesh*, but the publication of her two other novels after the death of that male writer proved that Mosteghanemi was the sole writer of *Memory in the Flesh* as well as her other novels. This scenario paved the way for *Chaos of the Senses* to find its fast track to popularity and as such was selected for translation by the American University in Cairo Press for translation. Obviously, the popularity of the author was one of the main reasons for selecting *Chaos of the Senses* for translation.

6. *Chaos of the Senses*: Translation Vs. Retranslation

This section compares the conditions that surrounded the two translations of *Chaos of the Senses* as well as the roles of the human agents who participated in the process of translation and retranslation. As mentioned above, *Chaos of the Senses* like other Mosteghanemi's works gained popularity in the Arab world after her first novel *Memory in the Flesh* won Naguib Mahfouz Prize for literature in 1998. A direct result for this popularity and prize-winning was the selection of *Memory in the Flesh* as well as Mosteghanemi's subsequent works, such as *Chaos of the Senses*, for translation into English by the American University in Cairo Press. As will be discussed below, these translations did not succeed in giving *Chaos of the Senses* a second life. This gave way to another publisher i.e., Bloomsbury to venture new translations of both *Memory in the Flesh* in 2013 and *Chaos of the Senses* in 2015. The two translations of *Chaos of the Senses* will be discussed in detail and the paratexts associated with these translations will be analyzed.

6.1 *Chaos of the Senses* (2004) Translated by Baria Ahmar

Like her first novel i.e., *Memory in the Flesh*, Mosteghanemi's second novel *Fawda Al-Hawas* was translated into English twice. Both translations had the same literal translation of the title of the novel i.e., *Chaos of the Senses*. The first translation was sponsored by the American University in Cairo Press following its publication. The American University in Cairo Press undertook to translate and publish any novel that wins Naguib Mahfouz Prize for Literature which is organized by the American University in Cairo Press as well as other works by authors who win Mahfouz medal (Jensen, 2002). This simply explains the reason for selecting *Chaos of the Senses* for translation into English. The novel was one of a prize-winning author's works and was selected for its aesthetic and literary value in the first place and as such this can be taken as the reason behind selecting this novel for translation. The American University in Cairo Press released the translation in 2004. The translation was undertaken by Baria Ahmar; a Lebanese Journalist, translator and author. Ahmar is an activist feminist who originally writes on women's rights and this explains her interest in the translation of *Chaos of the Senses* as well as Mosteghanemi's prize-winning novel *Memory in the Flesh*.

As for the paratexts associated with this translation, they include adding a different cover for the novel. The new cover features abstract paintings of women suffering. The painting is meant to express the concept that the title of the novel expresses. This is one of the paratexts that are usually used to promote works coming from the periphery, especially from the Arab world where women are always portrayed as being suppressed and need to be rescued. The top of the front English cover carries the sentence: "A Modern Arabic Novel" as well as the name of the translator i.e., Baria Ahmar. The back cover of the translation features the name of the publisher i.e., the American University in Cairo Press followed by a comment that reads as "Modern Arabic Literature".

Unfortunately, the translations of Mosteghanemi's *Chaos of the Senses*, *Memory in the Flesh*; her prize-winning novel, as well as the translations of her other works i.e., *Bed Hopper*, and *The Art of Forgetting* have not translated her Arabic wide-readership and reception among the general English-language readership as conveyed by the sales of these translations. The belief in the aesthetic and literary value of Mosteghanemi's works in general and *Chaos of the Senses* in particular led Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing (BQFP) to publish an all-new translation of *Chaos of the Senses* under the same title i.e., *Chaos of the Senses* in 2015. The translation was undertaken by Nancy Roberts who earlier translated works by major Arab writers like Naguib Mahfouz, Ghada Samman, and Salwa Bakr. She also won the Arkansas Arabic Translation Award for translating Ghada Samman's *Beirut '75* and she also received a commendation from the judges of the 2008 Banipal Prize for translating of Salwa Bakr's *The Man from Bashmour*.

It is worth mentioning here that Mosteghanemi herself was not satisfied with the American University in Cairo Press's translation of her novels. In Baaqeel's interview with her concerning the translation of her works, she openly criticizes the translation saying that: "The American University in Cairo was in a hurry to publish the translation after it [the novel] won Naguib Mahfouz Award in 1998" (Baaqeel, 2015:146). In Mosteghanemi's opinion, the main problem with translation in general is that translators impose their own 'method and linguistic composition' on the translated text. She adds that she wanted a poet or a literary translator to translate her novel not just any translator. In her comment on the new translation, Mosteghanemi states that she was sure that the new translation is "better than the previous translation because this time it was translated by an experienced translator who is a native English speaker- Raphael Cohen" (2008, 147). Moreover, Mosteghanemi added that she was given the option to choose from two titles for the new translation. The titles are: *The Dance of the Oblivion* and *The Bridges of Constantine*. She obviously chose *The Bridges of Constantine*; she thought that this title can 'arouse and prick the curiosity of the foreign reader' with the hope of achieving better reception and more circulation. This example obviously shows the role that an author can play in the process of translation. However, it is believed that only well-known authors can afford to make choices when it comes to the translation of their works.

6.2 *Chaos of the Senses (2015) (Re)Translated by Nancy Roberts*

The second translation of *Chaos of the Senses* under the same title came eleven years after the publication of the first translation. Mostaghanemi explicitly stated that she was unhappy with the American University in Cairo Press translation of her novel. The idea of getting a successful translation, of her works, has always been on Mostaghanemi's agenda. Mostaghanemi's search for popularity among the Anglophone readership that corresponds to her popularity in the Arab world and her success in getting a world-renowned publisher like Bloomsbury to publish her works show the role an author can play in promoting and influencing the selection of one work over others for translation. After introducing this new translation of *Chaos of the Senses*, the study will examine what the author, translator, and publisher did with the new translation that they thought was lacking in the first translation performed by Baria Ahmar. Particularly, the study will investigate the paratexts that have been associated with the new translation.

The result was that Bloomsbury re-published a new translation of *Chaos of the Senses* in 2015. This time the translation was undertaken by Nancy Roberts. Although the second translation of

Memory in the Flesh got a new title, the second translation of Chaos of the Senses kept the same literal translation of the title which shows that this kind of paratextual effect may have not paid off in the case of Memory in the Flesh so it was avoided in the case of the second translation of Chaos of the Senses. In Tarbush's estimation, Bloomsbury obviously wanted to avoid confusion with the first translation. She adds that the new title is evocative is totally justified because Constantine is well-known for its "ravines, gorges and spectacular bridges, and is sometimes called the City of Bridges" (Tarbush, 2013). However, I think the new title was a paratextual attempt to improve the reception and circulation of the novel and it was not repeated in the case of Chaos of the Senses because it did not achieve its goal in the second translation of Memory in the Flesh as The Bridges of Constantine.

In addition, the novel got a new cover that features a stereotypical image of Middle Eastern women as held by people in the West. Qualey (2014) describes the image of the woman on the cover of Chaos of the Senses as an echo of the jackets used for the popular "saving Muslim women" subgenre." The addition of this image is an indication of the publisher's mindset of promoting Arabic literary works translated into English.

The top front cover also features a quotation from the Independent on Sunday that reads as "One of the richest and most evocative books that I have read all year. The back cover of the novel also features some quotations from the Independent on Sunday, 'the literary phenomenon' ELLE, The Times, and the Daily Mail. The quotations chosen for Chaos of the Senses differ in their content from those chosen for the first translation. While the quotations printed on the cover of Memory in the Flesh stressed that the novel is a winner of Nuguib Mafouz Medal for Literature, the quotations printed on the cover of Chaos of the Senses all refer to the themes of the novel itself. These quotations stressed that the novel addresses both love and politics. For example, the quotation from the Daily Mail states that: "Love affairs, like politics are both complex and quixotic. This novel explores both, a window into a different world." The quotation from The Times reads as: "Framed by a powerful love story ... No emotion is small here; the writing is lush and stately." It is easy to recognize the departure from the kind of quotations which accompanied the publication of the first translation of the novel. This can be interpreted by the fact that the novel was retranslated and republished at the time of upheavals, revolutions, and civil wars in the Arab world. Making references to politics and to the themes of the novel which addresses the Algerian war of independence may increase interest in a novel which describes in detail the Algerian revolution and its aftermath on the political and social levels.

7. Conclusion

Mosteghanemi's novel Chaos of the Senses was first translated into English by Baria Ahmar and was published by the American University in Cairo Press in 2004 under the title Chaos of the Senses, obviously, a literal translation of its Arabic title. A new translation, commissioned by Bloomsbury and undertaken by Nancy Roberts, appeared in 2015. It was intended as an improvement of Ahmar's translation.

An investigation of the paratexts that were associated with the two translations show that both publishers resorted to paratexts. However, while the American University in Cairo Press relied on peritexts i.e., "paratexts that appear in the same location as the text and are provided by the author or publisher" (Genette, 1997, 3), Bloomsbury used both peritexts and epitext i.e. "any paratextual element not materially appended to the text within the same volume but circulating, as it were, freely, in a virtually limitless physical and social space" (ibid). Although the retranslation that was published by Bloomsbury used more paratextual elements, in addition to textual improvements of the translation, the new translation has not achieved much better results in terms of reception as manifested in both reception and circulation.

Further research is necessary to investigate the larger picture of the socio-cultural literary translation to find out answers to the problems of reception and circulation of *Chaos of the Senses* and other titles translated from Arabic into English, which faced the same fate of translation,

retranslation, and little reception and circulation although these novels sold unprecedented numbers of copies in their original language (i.e., Arabic).

References

- Baaqeel, N. (2015). An Interview with Ahlam Mosteghanemi, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 26: 1-2, 143-153, DOI: 10.1080/0957404.2015.1035055.
- Brown, M. H. (1994). *The Reception of Spanish American Fiction in West Germany 1981 -91*, Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Clark, P. (2013) *The Bridges of Constantine* (Book review). Published in Banipal 51. http://www.banipal.co.uk/book_reviews/121/the-bridges-of-constantine/. Last accessed: 12/12/2020.
- Connelly, B. (2016). Washington Independent Review of Books. <http://www.washingtonindependentreviewofbooks.com/index.php/bookreview/chaos-of-the-senses>. Last accessed 12/12/2020.
- Genette, G. (1997). *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Translated by Jane E. Lewin and foreword by Richard Macksey, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press.
- Jensen, K. (2002). A Literature Born from Wounds Ahlam Mostaghanemi's 'Memory in the Flesh', *Al Jadid*, Vol. 8, no. 39 (Spring 2002). <http://www.aljadid.com/content/ahlam-mostaghanemis-memory-flesh>. Last accessed: 12/12/2016.
- Baker, M. (2010). Narratives of terrorism and security: 'accurate' translations, suspicious frames. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 3(3), 347-364.
- Mosteghanemi, A. (2007). *Chaos of the Senses*. Translated by B. Ahmar. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007. [First published in Arabic as Fawda al-hawas, 1998].
- Mosteghanemi, A. (2008). *Memory in the Flesh*. Translated by Baria Ahmar Sreih and Peter Clark. London: Arabia Books, 2008. [First published in Arabic as Dhakirat al-jasad, 1993].
- Mosteghanemi, A. (2008). *The Bridges of Constantine*. Translated by Raphael Cohen Peter. Bloomsbury UK & Qatar. [First published in Arabic as Dhakirat al-jasad, 1993].
- Munday, J. (2016). *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications* 4th ed. London: Routledge.
- Tarbush, S. (2013) Bloomsbury publishes new translation of Ahlem Mosteghanemi's Dhakirat al-Jasad. <http://thetanjara.blogspot.com/2013/12/bloomsbury-publishes-new-translation-of.html> last accessed 12/12/2020.
- Qualey, M. L. (2014) Is It Possible to Translate Ahlam Mostaghenami's Popularity? <https://arablit.org/2014/09/14/is-it-possible-to-translate-ahlam-mostaghenamis-popularity/>. Last accessed: 12/12/2020.
- <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/dust-promises-ahlam-mosteghanemi-book-review-allegories-erotic-love-and-acts-political-resistance-a6819926.html>