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### **Translating Walt Whitman into Arabic**

Historically, we can say that Arabic culture was introduced to Walt Whitman through three important books. First, through the translation, by Mohammed F. Alshunaiti, of a critical work written by James Miller titled, in Arabic, (والث ویتمان شاعر أصیل) or *Walt Whitman: A Genuine Poet*, published in Cairo in 1961. This book, which included some translations of Whitman's poems, affected Arabic poetry by pushing it free from rigid Arabic meters, and making it adopt special notes and rhythms that allow the Arabic poet the free expression of the individual modern poet. Because of its importance, the book was republished in 1983.

The second book is a translation of Walt Whitman's work "Leaves of the Grass" (from *Selected Poems*) by the Iraqi poet Saadi Yusef, published in Baghdad in 1976. Yusef provided his translation with an introduction that covered many aspects of Whitman's art and life, as well as the historical background of freedom and democracy in the U.S. That is why, as I remember, many intellectuals of the time carried a copy of Yusef's translation of "Leaves of the Grass" under their arms.

The third book is a new translation of "Song of Myself" by the Syrian poet and academic Abed Ismael, published in Damascus in 2006 with a brief introduction in which Ismael outlined his reasons for retranslating this unique poem. There are also, of course, other translations of individual Whitman poems in magazines and newspapers here and there.

In making a comparison between the two translations of "Song of Myself" done by Yusef and Ismael I can say that Yusef's translation is, in general, more poetic and suggestive, using bright diction and condensed language. Yet, Yusef makes some intrusions on the text of "Song of Myself" without convincing justifications. For instance, in the following lines from section 5, line 9 and after:

*How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd  
over upon me,  
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your  
tongue to my bare-stript heart,  
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held  
my feet.*

In his translation, Yusef changes the gender from the masculine to the feminine. From my point of view, this act changes the meaning and distorts the ideas of the poet. This translation alters a situation that is part of the original culture of the poem, an alteration which is not acceptable, no matter how much translation might be considered an art. It imposes a patriarchal ethics and culture on the text, without regard for Whitman's western culture. This is treason to the text, because the translator, as we know from translation theory, must be neutral in these situations and has no right to impose his ideology on the text.

Yusef also randomly removes lines of text, perhaps to concentrate on some words and meanings, but this is also a step that has no justification and is sometimes done in an abusive way. See, for instance, Section 2 line 8:

*I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised  
and naked,*

The translator cuts it as follows:

*I will go to the bank  
by the wood  
and become undisguised and naked,*

In Arabic, he words it in this way:

سوف أذهب إلى ضفة النهر  
جنب الغابة  
وأخلع قناعي وردائي.

Such redistribution of lines happens in many places, without valid artistic reasons.

Look also at the last line in section 6:

*And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.*

He redistributes it as follows:

*And to die...  
is different from what any one supposed,  
and luckier.*

He says in Arabic:

أن يموت المرء ...  
أمر مختلف عما يظن،  
أمر أسعد حظاً.

Adding the three dots suggests that the poet refers to something missing in the text that the reader must consider and add for himself, something Whitman did not mean--but the translator inserted it.

Sometimes Yusef has a poor understanding of the poet's meaning in the phrase at the beginning of section 3:

*Nor any more youth or age*

He translates the word "age" as an "era":

ولا من شباب، أو عصر

Clearly, from the context it means "old age." If the curious reader knows English well and goes back to the original text he would find many such misunderstandings of words and phrases. These misunderstandings are rarely present in Ismael's translation of Whitman's "Song of Myself."

An Arabic reader's first impression of Ismael's translation of "Song of Myself" might be that it is a bit literal and prosaic as far as the construction of sentences and phrases, but actually we find here an accurate translation of the language of the text. The translator also correlated the poet's intended meaning in more professional way. The reader can assume that Ismael's translation is closer to Whitman's smooth flowing style. Ismael was able to untie the knots Yusef made in the text. For instance, Yusef depends on the surface meaning of the words or the phrases while Ismael goes beyond that. Look, as an example, at the phrase "*the wolverine*" in line 42, section 15, which Yusef interpreted as a kind of weasel, while the accurate interpretation is a native or inhabitant of the state of Michigan, as suggested by the context "*sets traps on the creek.*"

There are, of course, other examples I can offer in this regard, and although a reader could say that the two translations have different visions concerning the text, I assume that Ismael's translation is closer to the spirit and art of Whitman and his poetry.