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To cite this article: Ghenwa Hayek (2017) Whitewashing Arabic for global consumption: translating race in The Story of Zahra, Middle Eastern Literatures, 20:1, 91-104, DOI: 10.1080/1475262X.2017.1303988

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1475262X.2017.1303988

Published online: 28 Jun 2017.
Whitewashing Arabic for global consumption: translating race in *The Story of Zahra*

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**ABSTRACT**

This article argues that in reading comparatively the Arabic and English versions of Hanan al-Shaykh’s 1980 *Hikāyat Zahra*, a pattern of omitting race and racial language emerges in the English version, published in 1986. I use a close reading of the translation’s selective appropriation of the original’s racial and political language to argue for a more intersectional approach to Arabic women’s writing, even as I acknowledge the structural and institutional contexts and constraints under which they operate and circulate in the global market of “world literature.”

First published in 1980, Hanan al-Shaykh’s *Hikāyat Zahra* is a novel that has transcended its Arabic origins and established itself as a world literary text, in the Damroschian sense of a work that has had an “effective life within a literary system beyond that of its original culture.” The novel tells the story of a troubled young Lebanese woman named Zahra in the early years of Lebanon’s civil war. It has been critically acclaimed and hailed as an indictment of Lebanese (and Arab) patriarchal culture, as well as a text that lays bare the horrors of violence, war, and trauma. The novel is divided into two distinct parts; its Arabic version names them “part one” and “part 2,” with numbered, untitled chapters in the first part, and one continuous chapter in the second. The first part of the novel is taken up by Zahra’s life in an unnamed country in sub-Saharan Africa in which she seeks refuge from her life in Lebanon by traveling to visit her uncle, who is in political exile. While there, she meets and marries a young man from southern Lebanon. This part of the novel has three distinct first-person voices: Zahra’s, her uncle Hashem’s, and her husband Majed’s. The second part of the novel recounts Zahra’s return to Beirut upon the breakup of her marriage, and her affair with and ultimate death at the hands of a neighborhood sniper who murders her after she has revealed her pregnancy to him.

Al-Shaykh’s novel has been a commercial and critical success since its publication. In Arabic, it has gone into several print runs; the most recent edition in 2009 is its fifth. Like much of Hanan al-Shaykh’s other writing, *Zahra* is a text that has also circulated easily in the global literary sphere. The novel has been translated into many languages, including French, English, Spanish, Hebrew, Croatian, Italian, Polish, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian. Since its 1986 translation into English, which is credited to...
Peter Ford with the cooperation of Hanan al-Shaykh, there have been multiple editions of the British and American versions of the novel.7 As a much translated—and highly teachable—text, Zahra is also one of those “metropolitan teaching texts” that have been assimilated into classrooms in the western world.8 Appearing during a moment characterized by a deepened critical engagement with feminist and gender studies in Arabic literary studies, the novel endures as a canonical text of modern Arabic feminist literature.9

It is unanimously acknowledged that Zahra is a novel “about” Lebanon. In an interview with Paula Sunderman, Hanan al-Shaykh says as much, stating that “The Story of Zahra was about the early period of the war in the mid-seventies when snipers were in complete power.”10 miriam cooke describes Zahra as being “intimately […] interwoven with the perversity of the Lebanese war,” while Evelyne Accad writes that the novel’s subject matter “brings to light some of the most crucial aspects of sexuality as they relate to social and political problems and, more specifically, to war.”11 Such readings emphasize the second part of the novel, when Zahra has returned from her African sojourn. Even accounts of the novel’s representation of the deracination and alienation of displacement and exile, such as Marianne Marroum’s “What’s so Great about Home?,” which pay more attention to the novel’s first part, focus on the way that Zahra’s body is understood and constructed by the two men in her life—her uncle Hashem, and her husband Majed—as a synecdoche for their homeland. Marroum understands the novel, then, to be “an overt criticism of one’s excessive attachment to one’s homeland.”12 While ascribing a critique of the strictures of the patriarchal nation-state to the novel, Ann-Marie Adams writes that “the solution is not a negation of national culture or the nation-state, only a dismissal of the logic of the gendered stereotypes used to ‘map’ that ‘imagined [Lebanese] community.’”13

Such critiques, often feminist, focusing on the novel’s admittedly contentious relationship to the nation tend, however, to elide discussions of the Other against which that nation is constructed. For, just as the novel depicts and questions the limits of Lebanese nationalism, it simultaneously produces a discourse not only about the gendered Other, but also about the geographical and racial Other to which Lebanese identity is compared. It also reproduces a racial discourse about “Africa” and the people who inhabit it. For example, as Zahra explores exile and the complexities of the diasporic experience, it raises questions about the ways in which Lebanese diasporic identity is constructed in a non-western immigrant space, a place repeatedly and insistently described by the metonymic geographical referent “Africa.”14 In doing so, Zahra participates in a far-reaching cultural debate about the complex and diverse entanglements of place, position, and power in the Lebanese imaginary of emigration that in the critical scholarship on Zahra is often subsumed by an analysis of patriarchal power. But, as Anne McClintock has argued, even as they unpack the gendered myths and assumptions upon which nationalism is constructed, feminist critics must also “pay scrupulous attentions to the structures of racial, ethnic and class power that continue to bedevil privileged forms of feminism.”15 While it might be rather ironic to describe Middle Eastern feminism as a “privileged” form of feminism—and a better adjective may need to be sought—McClintock’s point remains salient.

Edward Said once noted that “the power to give or withhold attention is a power utterly essential to interpretation and to politics.” By being relatively inattentive to the manner in which race operates as a discursive structure in texts by Arabic women in Arabic and in translation, has the field of Arab feminist literary studies inadvertently participated in the perpetuation of the logic of racial stratification?16 I would argue that it is incumbent upon
us to think more critically about the *Zahra’s* imaginative geography and the way its language represents African men as nameless drunkards, its women as mute sex objects, and its environment as one that “infects” or pollutes the bodies and minds of Lebanese immigrants. In doing so, I engage with theories of intersectionality and with recent attempts to expand the geographic scope of Middle Eastern studies, which have often just focused on the East–West axis outlined in Akram Khater, John Karam, and Andrew Arsan’s inaugural editorial for *Mashriq/Mahjar*.

At this juncture, it may be worth highlighting that it is not at all my intention to label the novel or its author as racist. Rather, my interests in this project are two-fold. I first aim to understand the nuances in which racial language operates in *Hikayat* within a social and cultural experience of diaspora that is particular to Lebanon. For example, when certain characters in al-Shaykh’s novel uses the racial slur ‘*abd*, it is meant to underline certain things about Majed and his mother—that they are of a lower class, and that they use language which is understood to be vulgar or inappropriate. But it would also be misleading to claim, as Evelyne Accad does, that only the male characters in the novel use racist language. This elides the fact that *Zahra* does it too, for example. The novel’s racial language cannot be subsumed in gender. Rather, it is worth investigating how race is a signifying category that allows even the most marginalized of characters—*Zahra*, or Majed’s mother—to set themselves apart from the many Africans who appear as mute side characters in the novel. My second aim, and the focus of this article, is to explore why the novel was stripped of some of its racial nuances in the process of translating it into English, and what ramifications this decision may have on the experience of reading the novel in English versus in Arabic.

Evelyn Higginbotham has argued that race is situated and contextual, and must “be analyzed with an eye to its functioning and maintenance within specific contexts.” In the following section, I sketch out the ways in which race as a signifier operates in Arab society broadly, how its many terms are mobilized in *Hikayat*, and how the novel’s English translation tackles nuances of such terms. The subject of race in the Arabic language and Arab culture is a contentious one, made more complex by the different geographic, historical, and sociopolitical circumstances of different Arab countries, which are often understood as one culture. There are, for example, several African Arab league member-states with predominantly black populations, including Sudan, Somalia, and Djibouti. Moreover, North African countries and the Arabian Peninsula have different histories of encounters with black Africans—and different histories of integration/acceptance—than the generally more ethnically homogeneous Levant does. However, there is an almost unanimous consensus in the scholarly literature that, even taking into account the Islamic tradition’s racial tolerance, blackness has historically been understood to be linked to servility and inferiority in Arab culture. This connection is most explicit in the enduringly common racial epithet ‘*abd*, literally slave, which is still used in the Levant and Egypt to describe people of African origin.

One of the key observations that scholars who engage with racial issues in the Middle East make is that, despite their pervasiveness, such issues are often silenced. For example, in *Tell This in My Memory*, Eve Troutt Powell describes the way in which Egyptian journalists refuse to use the word ‘*abd* even as they are excoriating the racism of their own society. She reflects upon this “silence around this word, even between the most caring of observers,” and explores the larger historical silences that this conceals. Similarly,
Ella Shohat discussing the treatment of Israelis of African descent in Israel decries “the veil of secrecy surrounding racism.” Silence, as Troutt Powell and Shohat both suggest, carries within it a discursive violence of its own. A version of this silencing is at work, I argue, in the English translation of Hikāyat Zahra, which can only be drawn out in a comparative reading of the Arabic and English versions that is attentive to the translation choices made by Peter Ford and Hanan al-Shaykh.

In what follows, I pay especially close attention to the manner in which certain translation choices—particularly those in which racial referents are removed, or rewritten—alter the English reader’s experience of the text. I propose that this process of selective appropriation in effect functions to the text’s advantage. As its politics and racial language are attenuated, the English text transitions into what Nirvana Tanoukhi describes as a significantly different “horizon of expectation,” moving from a local horizon of reception in which the text is used to represent a multitudinous, sometimes problematic, local diasporic experience, to an Anglo-American “horizon of third-world literature” that reduces the novel to an indictment of the patriarchal violence of Arab masculinity. By examining the English translation’s silencing of the Arabic’s racial language, I hope to begin to sketch out preliminary thoughts on how Arabic literary scholarship may be enriched by a more intersectional approach sensitive not only to the manner in which Arab voices have been silenced, but also to the silences with which they might be complicit in order to circulate more successfully in the global marketplace.

**Whitewashing race in Zahra**

Before proceeding, I find it necessary to lay bare some of the assumptions I have made in writing this article. While keeping in mind the multi-person process and material realities of book production, and the fact that others (editors, other readers) may have also participated in the translation process, in this article, due to the dearth of evidentiary material otherwise (letters, documents, manuscript drafts), I confine myself to a text-based analysis of the original and its translation into English. Although supporting evidence would indubitably enrich this article’s argument, I do not think that this would alter it significantly, because there is enough textual evidence on hand. Thus, in this article, when I speak of the translators’ “choices,” it is with a sensitivity to the institutional and commercial pressures that may have produced them, but simultaneously a text-based assumption that Ford and al-Shaykh played the biggest part in the production of the translation. Another implicit assumption I have made is that translation is a political act, shaped by many different social contexts, but one which, in turn, participates actively in shaping others.

Scholars have critiqued several aspects of Hikāyat’s translation into English. For example, Roger Allen remarks that the English translation flattens some of the nuances of the text. He cites the way that the title fixes the ambiguous Arabic of Hikāyat Zahra, which can be both “the story of Zahra” and “Zahra’s Story,” and critiques the way that the English translation adds chapter titles to the first part of the novel, thereby removing a deliberate ambiguity in the Arabic, and “transform[ing] the narrative impact in a most unfortunate way.” Sabah Ghandour discusses how the translation cannot accommodate the nuances of Arabic’s diglossia between formal and colloquial Arabic. Hence, she argues, the English reader cannot distinguish as well as the Arabic reader can the moments when the text problematizes and manipulates the distinction between Zahra’s
voice and the narrator’s. This loss of nuance is unfortunate, particularly because al-Shaykh describes her use of colloquial Arabic in her writing as a formal contribution to modern Arabic literature, and as a way in which she has attempted to take the Arabic novel beyond the more classical rhetoric of the Mahfouzian model, as she puts it.

Both Allen and Ghandour’s remarks reinforce my own argument that even the most sensitive of readers can be less than attentive to the manner in which translation can serve not only as an aesthetic intervention or manipulation, but also as a political one, through devices such as selective appropriation.

In translation studies, the term selective appropriation is used to describe deliberate omissions or re-writing that enable the text to circulate in different contexts, which can be traced within the text itself. Mona Baker points out that the study of selective appropriation, the choices that translators make as they translate from one language into the other, reveals the cultural nuances and assumptions embedded in the production of translation. She gives the example of racialized language removed from English children’s stories, but which remains in their translations in Spanish, for instance. The selective appropriations made by translators reveal their social and cultural sensitivities. In a brief footnote critiquing Ford and al-Shaykh’s English translation of Hikāyat, Roger Allen notes that the translation could be better described as an abridgment of the original. Paying closer attention to what specifically is abridged as Hikāyat became Zahra reveals a remarkably consistent pattern of textual omission of complex matters, especially politics and racial language.

Timothy Brennan notes that local politics are often expunged from texts in translation, especially when these relate to national histories or unusually complex social situations. In some cases, this can result in a completely different text, as in the case of Paul Bowles’ translation/re-writing of Mohamad Choukri’s seminal al-Khubz al-hāfi. That translation, Nirvana Tanoukhi argues, produced a completely different kind of text, “a novel unconcerned with politics” that reframed Choukri’s social realist novel as an apolitical modernist novel. In Zahra, the omission is not that drastic. But it is enough to transform the figure of Hashem, Zahra’s uncle, from a deeply committed political figure to someone who is more of a disaffected intellectual. For example, in a long monolog on the pain of exile, in the English version Hashem wonders:

How can I live rather than exist in this country? How can I hope to return as a reformed Hashem, guided by reason rather than by emotions? How can that be, when the only people I meet here endlessly say the one French word over and over: ‘Bon! Bon!’; eat kibbe, accumulate wealth and money?

The English translation is a heavily redacted version of a much longer paragraph in the Arabic, in which Hashem is not asking an abstract ontological question of living versus existing, but rather much more specific, political questions:

Kayf atatawwar fi hadhā al-balad, kayf a’ād ilā lubnān wa anā’ a’rif an unāqish wa uqnī hattā wa afrid hizbi ‘alā kull man alqāh! How do I develop in this country? How do I return to Lebanon knowing how to argue, how to convince others—no—how to impose my party on all those I meet?

Stripping Hashem of his extreme political ideology, the translation misses an articulation of the relationship between political power and violence that the second half of the novel
makes explicit. The translation renders less obvious the original’s contention that patriarchy and authoritarianism are embedded into the fabric of Lebanese politics at home and in the diaspora. For example, the Arabic’s use of the verb afrid (to impose) ties Hashem’s political impulses and excesses to his attempt a few pages later to impose himself on his niece. The connection between masculinity and the political as it works in Lebanese and Arab political parties is emphasized in the verb. The choice to de-politicize Hashem perhaps unburdens the translators of having to explain the complexities of Lebanon’s politics at the time—a valid choice when translators hesitate to include too much explanatory information. After all, novels are not meant to be textbooks, although in the case of the Arab (and the area that used to be called “third”) world, as I discuss in the following section, they often are. Yet Ford and al-Shaykh’s decision to uncouple Hashem from his politics uncouples the English text from a political discussion—about Shehabism, the politics and treatment of members of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, etc.—that the Arabic engages in.

While expediency and the desire for global circulation could explain the translators’ decisions to omit Lebanese politics from the English translation of the text, there are larger questions to be raised about the translators’ frequent omissions of Hikāyat’s references to the explicitly racialized bodies of Africans. Selective appropriation is not limited to textual omission, but includes also re-writing, or re-naming. One way in which racial renaming operates in Zahra is in the manner that the translated text deals with the distinct words used in the Arabic text to describe black Africans. Linguistically, Arabic has many terms to refer to black Africans. While some have fallen into disuse with time, the most common include aswad (s.) / sūd/sūdan (pl.), zanjī (s.) / zanj/zunūj (pl.), and ifrīqī (s.) / ifrīqiyyūn (pl.). In Hikāyat, al-Shaykh most predominantly uses both zanjī, a term thought to have originated as a descriptor of East Africans but which has now come to denote Africans in general, and ifrīqī to describe Africans in the text. In the Arabic original, the former is connected to depictions of undifferentiated groups of people, such as when Hashem is describing “the laughter of the zunūj. They are drinking, as they did yesterday, as they do every night.” In contrast, the term ifrīqī is used as an adjective in the Arabic when individuals are differentiated, such as the “mughanniya ifrīqīyya” who sings in a “lahja hānāna” (“the African singer who sings with a sweet accent”). The choice to overwhelmingly translate these distinct words as “African” reduces the original’s nuances and the differentiation that a careful reader of the Arabic would have been able to detect.

Moreover, all of the characters in Zahra often allude to African men in language that Others these bodies to emphasize the alienation and distance from the host society which the novel’s immigrants feel. For example, as he walks down the street, Hashem observes “the laughter of the Africans […] getting drunk now, as they had yesterday, and do each night […] When blacks drink, they drink the whole world.” Later on in the same chapter, describing his surroundings, he complains “this African city is filled with glamour, din and people […] all mixed up with the voices of drunken Africans in their cane huts.” The sentence discursively separates between “people” and “Africans.” In the chapters narrated by Zahra, she speaks of naked women with hanging necklaces, and defiantly states that even “the best witchdoctor in all of Africa” would not be able to find her hidden diary. In English translation, as in the original, the Africa of her imagination is a place rife with magic, and sexuality. Like a colonial explorer, in the Arabic novel, when Zahra sits down to write, she jots down her impressions of “Africa, the weather, and the zunūj,” a phrase cut short in the English which just states that she
wrote her “impressions of Africa, of the weather.” In so doing, the translation occludes a moment in which Zahra is not pure victim, but also complicit in a cultural enterprise that seeks to represent Others. It is a moment in which the window to think about the internalization of the Lebanese encounter with colonialism and its internalization of certain colonial racial colonial discourses opens. Yet the English translation closes that window preemptively. The erasure of such nuances deprives the translation of the original text’s insights into the social, racial, and cultural structures that underpin identity formation in diasporic spaces.

Selective translation is linked to market forces, explicitly the desire for more global circulation. In the climate of the 1980s, the translators chose to remove the Arabic’s explicitly racialized descriptions of African female bodies, possibly because they would not be acceptable to an Anglophone readership that had picked up a book whose topics included the patriarchal oppression of Arab women. So, for example, a sentence in which Majed describes African women as “lips and sex only” is absent from the English. In another instance, Zahra catches a glimpse of Hashem’s lover, who she describes as “an African woman in Western clothes showing most of her breasts and with gold sandals on her feet and red lipstick on her lips.” While both the Arabic and the English versions of this sentence highlight the woman’s dissonant appearance by contrasting her as “African” with her “Western” clothing, the English seems to brake where the Arabic version pushes this image further. In the Arabic, the lipstick covers the woman’s “black lips,” as if to doubly emphasize the woman’s skin color, and thus underline the wantonness implied in her skimpy clothing and provocative lipstick in a manner that echoes racist discourses about African women and their sexualization.

In translation theory, it is common to think of the translation as doing violence to the text; but this also means that one of the fruitful ways in which, as individuals with “a sense of the language,” we can contribute to the understanding and nuancing of translations is, according to Gayatri Spivak, by “locat[ing] discontinuities at the level of diction, syntax or discourse that reveal the translation as a violent rewriting of the foreign text, a strategic intervention into the target-language culture.” This, in turn, forces us to think about the way that language travels across cultures, and what kinds of textual repressions and rewritings occur along the way. In Zahra, the textual omissions and re-writing of problematic racial language suggest an unease with baring this particular kind of violence. The translators’ strategy is to, essentially, omit or “whitewash” them in specific ways.

Nowhere is this tension more apparent than in the way that the English version of the novel grapples with the Arabic racial epithet ʿabd. While, as I have already demonstrated, the English text tries to pivot around zanj and ifrīqi, it stumbles on ʿabd. In Arabic, the word means “slave,” and it has been etymologically linked to racist descriptions of black individuals for centuries. While the word can be used to describe spiritual servitude of God—such as in the multitude of Arabic names for men that are variants of slave and God, such as Abdullah, Abdul-Rahman, Abdul-Hamid, and so forth—in contemporary Arabic society, it has also taken on a contextual meaning akin to the word “nigger” in English. In many ways, the two words share a history, in that they both have, over time, developed and attained deeply pejorative meanings. Eve Troutt Powell describes the word as a “painful epithet” commonly used to describe those of African descent in the Middle East, and also, to speak pejoratively of black individuals—in this case, African men and women. There is no mistaking the word’s violence
when it used. For that reason, in recent years (admittedly belatedly), it has been slowly
erased from popular commercial usage in Lebanon. So, for example, a popular candy
that used to be called rās al-ʿabd (“nigger head”) has now been renamed ṭarbūš Ghandour
(Ghandour’s fez, for the company that makes the chocolate). In short, there is no ambi-
guity about the word’s racist forcefulness. Yet the translation neutralizes the visceral
racism of the Arabic, and completely effaces its shocking violence, by choosing not to
use an equally violent English equivalent for the Arabic.

In Ḥikāyat, the word ʿabd appears several times, and is often linked to Majed and his
mother. Both of these characters are marked in the novel by their lower class status.
Majed is from a small southern Lebanese village, and his mother cleans houses in Beirut.
They are socially and culturally unlike Zahra and her uncle, who are educated and urban.
In addition to these plot details, both Majed and his mother speak in colloquial Lebanese
Arabic. In contrast, for example, Zahra’s uncle Hashem never does, using only Modern Stan-
dard Arabic. The first time the Arabic reader reads the word, Majed is remembering his
mother pleading with him as she packs his bags for his departure from Lebanon. He
recalls her saying, “ūʿā yā Mājid, ʿūʿā ya ḥabībī, kul shī wālā al-ʿabdāt” (“Careful, Majed,
Careful, my darling. Anything but those nigger women”).51 ʿūʿā, the word repeated twice
in that sentence, is used both as a warning and an admonishment. Here, in the first sentence,
it is combined with an apostrophic address to Majed, the unnamed woman’s son, and in the
second with the term of endearment ḥabībī, the repetition serving to highlight the pleading
tone. Whatever Majed’s mother is warning her son not to do is felt as a great threat, because
she has to implore him insistently. In the sentence following immediately afterward, the
reader gets an idea of what so concerns Majed’s mother about his departure, but here
the English translation departs considerably from the Arabic. In the English version of
the novel, instead of the racial epithet Majed’s mother tells him “avoid those African girls
like the plague.”52 Without the fervent pleading tone of the Arabic, and without the violence
of the racial slur, the sentence loses the urgency of the original. As such, it attenuates the
novel’s astute discussion of national anxieties around racial miscegenation that the novel
associates with its characters, especially those who are uneducated, poor, and rural, like
Majed and his mother. Majed and his mother, as socially and culturally disadvantaged as
they may be, nevertheless consider themselves better off than the Africans they imagine
will be preying on Majed. The novel’s use of the racial slur accentuates the way in which
race is the “ultimate trope of difference, artificially and arbitrarily contrived to produce
and maintain relations of power and subordination.” In this case, a sense of superior
national identity is evident even among those who are severely disenfranchised by class
and gender.53 Also, because national anxiety is often articulated as anxiety over future gen-
erations, as Majed’s mother explains her fear she introduces the problem of biracial children,
who are persecuted and unmarriageable. She asks Majed, “Do you want to have children
who are persecuted like that, and you along with them?” She describes the bi-racial daugh-
ter of a man named Darwish who is bullied by the children of the village. Majed’s mother
then recreates the chant that the children use to taunt the little girl: “ʿabdū ʿabīdū … snanū
bīḍa.”55 The Arabic again uses the racial slur and its diminutive form, and recreates a rhyme
in which the perceived blackness of ʿabd is contrasted with the word bid, the plural form of
abyad (white). Majed’s mother articulates her fear that her grandchildren will not belong to
her village society by mobilizing the ultimate scarecrow: social exclusion because of racial
difference; in this way, racial difference becomes the site that manifests the trauma of
emigration. Although the English translation takes into account the racialized language of the Arabic, rendering it as “blacky-black with white teeth,” without the freighted racial virulence of the original, which the diminutive form of the slur only serves to accentuate, it nevertheless weakens the power and urgency of the Arabic.56

Crucially for translation scholars, selective appropriation reveals not only aspects of the culture of the original language, but also the prejudices of the target language and culture. The translations enable these texts to have “a new life in a different setting, [allowing them to] participate in shaping the narrative perspective of the target audience.”57 Perhaps this dynamic provides some logic to Ford’s most inexplicable translation choices in the novel. The next time that the word ʿabd erupts in the text, Majed uses it as he is furiously complaining about his wife’s erratic behavior to Hashem:

\[
\textit{Khalas lah if'a' yâ H\textmu s imbâri\textmu sh\textmu fitha S\textmu 'ud imra't 'Ali M\textmu s titmashhâ h\textmu w\textmu l-bayt wa hiyeh h\textmu mli hal-r\textmu diy\textmu, wa ka'an\textmu tawtū w\textmu s\textmu il la' and rabbna. Al-sit\textmu t Zahra h\textmu mli il-r\textmu diy\textmu w bturq\textmu s bi l-sh\textmu 'ā, eh walla. Ish\textmu tū al-‘abid ya'\textmu mli heik.}
\]

It’s enough, Hashim, I’ve had it. The day before yesterday Suad, Ali Musa’s wife, saw her prancing around the house carrying that radio, the volume cranked up loud enough for God to hear it. Miss Zahra was carrying the radio and dancing in the streets, I swear! Even the niggers would be ashamed to do that.”58

In Ford’s version, several aspects of this conversation are different, Majed tells Hashem:

The day before yesterday they saw her walking round the outside of the house, carrying the radio, playing it turned up so loud that God himself could have heard it. Madame Zahra carrying a radio, dancing in the street. Yes, by heavens! Even gipsies would be ashamed to do such a thing!59

By substituting the vague “they” for Suad, Ali Musa’s wife, who is named in the Arabic, the English translation renders the subject of the sentence—the “they”—less known, and also more omnipresent. But it also removes the distinctiveness of Majed’s worry that, within the diasporic community, those he identifies with are gossiping about Zahra. It strips the English of the Arabic’s acute sense of community and shame, of being watched and being seen within that particular small section of society. It occludes the way Zahra’s scandalous actions combine with Majed’s acute sense of displacement within the (mostly middle-class) Lebanese immigrant community.

What is more interesting in the translation of this paragraph, of course, is how translation choices—particularly, the decision to make the text more accessible—reveal insights about the cultures of the origin and target languages even as they enact and inscribe difference. In English, the Arabic ‘abid becomes gypsies. Here, we see a slippage of racial stereotypes, revealing of the racial prejudices of both origin and target nation. The English word “gypsies” deracinates the Lebanese context of the racial slur, and instead embeds it into a centuries-old racialized European and British discourse against the Roma people, which illuminates the racial anxieties that white English society has over travelers and the Roma people.60 As the text travels into English, so do its racial referents. Rather than the racialized other of Arabic, the African body, the English reader encounters the racialized other of Europe, the Roma. In doing so, an aspect of the novel’s engagement with the Lebanese diasporic experience in Africa is further occluded as its racial language is rewritten.
Talking about translation

In the final paragraphs of this article, I want to complicate my own account of Zahra’s global trajectory by moving it outward from the text and into the realities of the global market for translation from the Arabic. Perhaps because so many academics in the field of modern Arabic literary studies are themselves accomplished and skillful translators, there is a substantial and growing body of work that explores the practice, politics, and challenges of translating Arabic literature into English.61 In these accounts, the frustrations of translating from the Arabic often have less to do with the practice of translation or such notions as “untranslatability,” and more to do with the challenges attendant to Arabic fiction reaching Anglophone readers.62 While they more or less agree that the situation is not as dire as the one Edward Said outlined in his “Embargoed Literature” essay in the early 1990s, scholars like Michelle Hartman, Marilyn Booth, and Amal Amireh nevertheless note that the exigencies and demands of the English language marketplace mean that, often, texts which are seen as too difficult, or too experimental, or not “representative” enough do not get translated.63 This scholarship is particularly aware of the ways in which Arabic-language novels from the Middle East—especially those produced by women—are consumed in a global marketplace that reduces them to ethnographic teaching texts, or, with similar lack of nuance, to “controversial” texts that are valued for shocking their local readers. This important body of work emphatically calls for—and, significantly, models—a more critical approach to Arab women’s writing. In that spirit, this article engages with calls to take seriously the ethics and politics of Arabic literary texts as they circulate in the world, while remaining sensitive to the pull of institutions, discourses, and politics on them, and to their local contexts.64

With this knowledge of the challenges facing translation from the Arabic, and the structural, institutional, political, and market obstacles that loom large over Arab women’s writing, I admit that, as Eve Troutt Powell puts it, “airing the issue of slavery/race [in English to an Anglophone readership] seems to bare too much,”65 and provokes a niggling sense of cultural betrayal. This resonates particularly strongly with me because I am not dealing with a distant historical past that can be understood to have passed, but with a more-or-less contemporary moment in which racism continues to be a hotly debated issue in contemporary Lebanese society.66 Paradoxically, however, it is perhaps the relationship of intimacy I have with both Arabic and English that compels me to engage with the topic. Intimacy, after all, encompasses the private that is not only positive, but also what is taboo, hidden, buried deep, and ignored in a culture’s psyche. Gayatri Spivak cites an ability and willingness to speak of intimate matters in the original language as a fundamental requirement of skilled translation; I would add that it may also be a fundamental requirement of the study of translated texts as well.67 To exist in the world as more ethical readers, Sandra Berman and Michael Wood proclaim, we must:

build linguistic bridges for present understandings and future thought, we must do so while attempting to respond ethically to each language’s contexts, intertexts and intrinsic alterity. This dual responsibility may well describe an ethics of translation or, more modestly, the ethical at work in translation.68

What is at stake in a closer examination of the creation and translation of difference is a scholarship that looks outward as well as inward, one that is attuned to the structural and
ideological injustices of discursive power—such as that of Orientalism—while not shying away from dealing with the ways in which forms of Arab cultural representation have themselves participated in the “Othering” of other bodies; a scholarship that is not only focused on the center–margin relationship, but on that between the margins themselves, what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih describe as the “shadowy side of the transnational,” even when the results are perhaps less than savory.

Notes

1. al-Shaykh’s later work has been translated by Catherine Cobham, of whom she speaks very highly in her interviews. See, Sunderman, “Between Two Worlds,” 302. I predominantly cite the English version except when necessary for my argument about translation.
4. The English edition is also divided into two parts, but the chapters—merely numbered in the Arabic—are given titles.
5. Michelle Hartman points out that al-Shaykh’s novels often do better commercially abroad than in Lebanon or the rest of the Arab world. See Hartman, “Gender, Genre.”
6. In what follows, I will refer to the English version as *Zahra* and to the Arabic as *Hikāyat*.
7. *Zahra* was first published in London by Quartet Books, which had been acquired recently by the Palestinian-born businessman Naim Atallah. The first American edition came out in 1994, with Anchor Books.
8. Spivak, “Translating Into English,” 94. Interestingly, Spivak correlates these texts with teaching interests in gender issues, a point to which I will briefly return later.
9. For example, Roger Allen includes it as one of the 12 novels he discusses at length in *The Arabic Novel*; while Allen distances his project from canon formation, he nevertheless describes *Zahra* as a “most effective fictional account of Lebanese society at a time of extreme crisis [and] an important addition to the still relatively small library of fiction in Arabic written by women.” Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 234.
10. Sunderman, “Between Two Worlds.”
11. cooke, *War’s Other Voices*, 50; and Accad and American Council, *Sexuality and War*, 45.
14. In many ways, this echoes both colonial and neocolonial discourses about the continent that see it as “blank darkness.” For more, see Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*; and Miller, *Blank Darkness*.
19. Although not unproblematic ones. For more on the relationship between West and North Africa, see Hall, *A History of Race*. For an overview of the classical literature on race in the Arabian Peninsula, see Lewis, *Race and Slavery*.
20. For more on Islamic discourses on race, see Lewis, *Race and Slavery*; and Hall, *A History of Race*.
21. Troutt Powell in her work is mostly concerned with the silenced history of slavery. See Troutt Powell, *Tell This in My Memory*, Introduction.
25. Ibid., fn.219, 232. In an earlier footnote, Allen mentions that the English title is a similarly limiting choice.
29. Ibid.
32. See Tanoukhi, “Rewriting Political Commitment.”
33. Al-Shaykh, Zahra, 64.
34. Al-Shaykh, Hikayat, 77.
35. See Aghacy, Masculine Identity. See also: Pannewicke, Khalil, and Albers, Commitment and Beyond.
36. For more on different etymologies of blackness in Classical Arabic, see Lewis, Race and Slavery, esp. 50–53.
37. Ibid., 50.
38. Al-Shaykh, Hikayat, 47.
39. Ibid., 31.
40. Al-Shaykh, Zahra, 34.
41. Ibid., 53.
42. Ibid., 14 and 22.
43. Al-Shaykh, Hikayat, 30; and al-Shaykh, Zahra, 27.
44. Al-Shaykh, Hikayat, 80.
45. Al-Shaykh, Zahra, 113; and al-Shaykh, Hikayat, xx.
46. For more on the dominant iconography of black femaleness, see Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies.”
47. Spivak, Outside in the Teaching Machine, 25.
48. For more, see Lewis, Race and Slavery.
49. For more on the history of the term “nigger,” see Kennedy, Nigger.
50. Troutt Powell, Tell This in My Memory, 3.
51. Al-Shaykh, Hikayat, 98.
52. Al-Shaykh, Zahra, 69.
54. Al-Shaykh, Zahra, 69.
55. Al-Shaykh, Hikayat, 98.
56. Al-Shaykh, Zahra, 69.
58. al-Shaykh, Hikayat, 119 (my translation).
59. al-Shaykh, Zahra, 83.
60. See Powell and Lever, “Europe’s Perennial ‘Outsiders’.”
62. Even Robin Cresswell’s recent article in Public Culture that begins and explores the “untranslatable” in Arabic uses it merely as a starting-off point to explore the more real challenges facing Arabic literature to be translated. Cresswell, “Is Arabic Untranslatable?”
63. For a wide-ranging discussion of this, see Booth, “On Translation and Madness.”
64. See Amireh, “Publishing in the West”; Hartman, “Gendre, Genre”; and McManus, “Scale in the Balance.”
66. For example, recent calls to think about structural racism toward Palestinian and Syrian refugees, or South Asian domestic workers.
69. Lionnet and Shih, Minor Transnationalism, 11.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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