

Order No. C345

Short Stories by Sheikha Helawy
A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing
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הזמנה מס. C345

סיפורים קצרים מאת שייכא הילאוי
הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת
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Table of Contents

Aims and General Description3

Conceptual Background4

Procedures, Methodologies, and Detailed Description7

Bibliography11

Aims and General Description:

My thesis will be comprised of the translation from Arabic of short stories culled from three collections written by Sheikha Helawy, an Arab-Israeli writer, together with an analytic introduction. Each collection has a different thematic focus: *Women Living in the Dark*, reveals the obscurities within the patriarchal norms faced by Bedouin women; *The Windows are Dreadful Books*, addresses issues of selfhood; *Order No. C345*, takes social struggles arising from various stereotypical societal issues and norms as its theme. While all Helawy's stories are flash fiction and employ sarcasm, each collection takes a different stylistic approach, as well a different theme. She generally uses elements of both realism and surrealism throughout, but surrealism is more prominent in *Order No. C345* and the *The Windows are Dreadful Books* than in *Women Living in the Dark*. And while the stories taken together expose a full range of societal constraints, yet as opposed to that of *Women Living in the Dark*, which specifically narrates the reality of the women in Bedouin society, the societies she describes in *Order No. C345* and the *The Windows are Dreadful Books* are generally undefined, and, at times these stories are even narrated by a non-specified narrator. Still, the circumstances or implications of the stories are not alien to those of the Arab community in Israel. Broadly speaking, her stories depict a new generation striving to live up to date with a contemporary outlook while coping with stark social, familial, or political instability. The stories mirror the deprivation or misfortune of individuals, as well as their families' ordeals.

My translations will aim to retain the meaning, message, and atmosphere of Helawy's stories, and to approximate, as closely as possible, the styles, rich in symbolism and metaphoric expressions, which characterize her work.

Conceptual Background:

The atmosphere adopted for most of her stories are mysterious and dark; the narrator or protagonist is undefined at best. Through her stories, Sheikha Helawy criticizes society, war, misfortune and disadvantageous situations. The stories draw a picture of daily life, the relation between individuals and their surroundings, as well as past experiences, and society's preconceived notions and expectations. While the story locales and characters are not identified as specifically Palestinian, it is somehow implied that they are, especially for the collections of *Order No.C345* and *The Windows are Dreadful Books*. As to her *Women Living in the Dark*, the society is more defined to accentuate the problems women of Bedouin background face. In all three collections, she succeeds in highlighting personal tragedies and past agonies. As Allen and Bernofsky explain in their introduction to *In Translation*: "Thinking about translation means thinking about the gaps in our literature and our ability to communicate, revealed by comparison with the capacities of other languages and traditions of thought. It also means thinking about the gaps in our political and cultural discourses, asking ourselves what and who has been left out." Since the stories either allude to or portray contexts and traditions of Arab culture in Israel including Bedouin society, translating the text from Arabic must strive to keep the transparency of the traditions and cultural understanding present in the target text of English.

Sheikha Helawy was raised in a Bedouin village near Haifa and later moved to Yaffa, where she has been a resident for over twenty years. Recently receiving the Al Multaqa prize for the short story, she is considered one of the most promising, up-and-coming Arab writers in Israel. Her publications include one poetry collection and three short-story collections. Some of her poems and short stories have been translated into English, Hebrew, German, and Bulgarian. As she explains in one of her interviews, in Bedouin communities, storytelling is a natural way of expressing ideas, which has contributed a lot to her style and to forming her own viewpoint. From that standpoint, everything speaks to her and everything - even a tree - can have a voice, as she carries on a constant conversation with the surrounding environment. Her upbringing, as she moved from Bedouin life to city life, and her different forms of education have all contributed to the styles and social concerns of her stories.

In *Women Living in the Dark*, her plots and characters are mostly taken from the Bedouin society she knows so well. In this collection, the women live in a world that blinds them from their potential and self-fulfillment; they are portrayed as submissive, kept down by men and social norms, a trend that Helawy openly criticizes. The dialogue in these stories is colloquial, in dialect, with an evident Bedouin accent. Retaining the dialect in the English translation as a distinct aspect of the culture will require some decisions in the process. Reacting to the translation of

Jacopone da Todi in a section of *In Translation*, the translator Lawrence Venuti comments, “The language is ...marked by heterogeneity: the simple lexicon contains dialectal forms (the repeated assimilation of -nd- to -nn- in ‘quanno’ for ‘quando,’ ‘granne’ for ‘grande,’ ‘pensanno’ for ‘pensando’) and vernacular forms ...” (194). Venuti’s references to the dialectical issues in translating Jacopone da Todi, illustrated by the variations of old Italian words, exemplifies the problems translators’ face in their attempts to achieve “semantic correspondence,” and the need to compensate for what can be lost in relation to context (194). Considering this feature, the peculiar tone and syntax of Helawy’s writing (i.e. Bedouin dialect vis-a-vis mainstream Arabic) will need to be captured or approximated in my translation.

In her second published collection, *The Windows are Dreadful Books*, Helawy steps out of her Bedouin environment and focuses on the struggles within the individual and carries the conflicts outward through windows that look out onto different issues of society. In this collection, Helawy reveals the conflicts a human being can be faced with as they stretch out to the exterior culture and its disparities. Her voice is far from accepting of some of the mentalities or traditions of the community. The characters and settings in this volume do not necessarily represent a Palestinian theme, but the circumstances and events allude to a Palestinian tradition and way of life. In *In Translation*, Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky, discussing the culture of translation, refer to Friedrich Schleiermacher’s explanation that “the exceptional linguistic finesse of the best translations transports the reader to the author’s social and cultural sphere” (xvi). As the stories here present the struggle of generalized individuals who strive to survive personal turmoil as a result of some dystopian reality, and the similarities to that of the Palestinian community are only circumstantial, my challenge here will be to suggest the “social and cultural sphere” with the appropriate nuance.

Helawy, in her the third collection, *Order No. C345*, adopts a new stylistic approach to give us a picture of the struggles of her characters, surrealism. Sometimes the narrator or the character is an intangible entity, such as a personified memory. At other times, the narrator can be a person, or an animal. Helawy’s short stories seem to function as an observing eye of human need and emotions. Using highly imaginative expressions or concepts, she shifts away from the romanticism or realism that characterizes the work of most Palestinian short story writers. Most Arab short stories published in the late 20th century, including the Palestinian ones, “strive for realism, concentrating upon Arab society and the hardships and aspirations of the [farmworkers]” (Moreh, 291). As Helawy stretches her imagination to relay her message and crosses the boundaries of what is considered real, her literary approach becomes surrealistic. The societal issues posed are real, yet the plots do not necessarily take place in reality.

The plots in this collection can consist of conflicting time periods in the same story. There can be a strong sense of the past experience that conquers the present, a mingling of time and tenses, or plot and narrator. The main character can recall a memory and a future scene in one sentence. At times, the narrator's identity is only revealed at the end of the story. Keeping this in mind, the challenge is to maintain the same style in the translation. Deborah Smith, writing in the *L.A. Review of Books*, asserts that "Languages function differently, much of translation is about achieving a similar effect by different means; not only are difference, change, and interpretation completely normal, but they are in fact an integral part of faithfulness." Therefore, preserving the atmosphere of time confusion and intermixing of scenes, as well as the surprise element in revealing the characters, are important to the accuracy of the translated text.

Furthermore, while the stories may seem elusive, what is revealed about the characters and their circumstances is the important element of her stories; it is about the difficulties and struggles one can face in society. Smith, known for her award-winning but controversial translation of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* from Korean to English, claims that "[l]iterary style is not simply a mark of identity, like a fingerprint — it also has a function and a significance." Smith further explains that "[t]ranslating from Korean into English involves moving from a language more accommodating of ambiguity, repetition, and plain prose, to one that favors precision, concision, and lyricism." The same could be said about translating from Arabic to English and, quite particularly, for the style of the short stories of Sheikha Helawy. Aside for the known linguistic distance between Arabic and English, the use surrealistic images and mysterious plot development in some of her stories should carry through into the translation to the English text.

In her article, "The Appropriation of Tradition in Selected Works of Contemporary Arab Women Writers," Suyoufie states that, "Some contemporary Arab women writers manipulate traditional material in their fiction and mark the personal, aesthetic, and political aspects of their contact with the tradition" (Suyoufie, 216). The women in this collection try to find their true inspiration and fulfillment. Helawy deals with women's issues with a feminist outlook in mind, featuring the strength of women, which requires the translation to be sensitive to the gender roles of society. Like many Arab short story writers, she represents such roles in her stories with more freedom than anticipated. According to Mehrez as she tries to correlate the relationship between gender and translation in her article "Translating Gender": "Both gender and translation permeate, define, and shape our very identities" (Mehrez, 107). Therefore, translating such stories requires not only immense understanding of the culture itself but also the ability to capture the atmosphere and message pertaining to the role of women.

Procedures, methodology and detailed description:

The project will consist of translations of selected stories from three collections by Sheikha Helawy, as well as an explanation of the difficulties faced in the process of the translation. Some of the issues of translation that pertain to two sets of difficulties, ones that are inherent in the writing itself such as style and dialect (that can be especially challenging even for an Arabic reader.) Another set of difficulties that pertain to the deep differences between cultures, such as linguistic difference. I will note the difficulties faced with translating a surrealistic, imaginative narration or plot into English, while still keeping the intended meaning and message of the text. Especially in *Order No. C345*, where her stories paint animated motion pictures in the mind of the reader, it is the translator's difficult duty to retain that style and atmosphere, As Denys Johnson-Davis mentions in one of his interviews, "One of the difficulties is to be creative within the strict confines of the text in front of you... to try to accomplish in English not simply stories rendered into a readable and acceptable style ... [but to] give some idea of the ... of the original" (pg. 84).

My thesis will test the way the figurative devices used by Helawy in the original text work with the translation into English in theory and in practice, especially with regard to point of view, figurative expressions, temporal designations, and surprise elements. As stated by Allen in his article, "The Happy Traitor: Tales of Translation," "[T]ranslation in both theory and practice can easily produce ...transcultural faux pas, most of which occur beyond the purely word-for-word translation level" (Allen, 473). I will explain how I dealt with these issues in my introduction. Similarly, the translation will examine the way the author uses slang or dialect in her stories and how these will be rendered in English. I would like to retain the meaning of the text regardless of the linguistic and cultural challenges. As Denys Jonson-Davis quotes Edward Sapir in one of his interviews: 'The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.' Then he continues to explain that, "There is of course the additional purely linguistical difficulty, which is that Arabic grammar and syntax differ widely from that of English" (Jonson-Davies, 86).

Stories to be translated:

From *Order No. C345*:

1. "A Space for Barking": A story about two metaphoric dogs in a battlefield where each tells its point of view about bravery and inner fear.
2. "Order No. C345": In this story prosthetics become dancers. A secretary in a prosthetic sales company, who surprisingly at the end of the story is revealed to have prosthetic-legs, uses her capacities to perfect her secretive dance show.

3. "A White Hole": The story starts with the idea of a woman requesting from her husband to fix the holes in the wall of their house. The reader learns later that the narrator is a senile woman telling her story about holes in her room as they are her only escape to her own world.
4. "The Liberator (A story of Aspiration)": The narrator wishes to write a story about a young man she saw in one of the fancy hotels in a coastal city, who looks like he stepped right out of the movie, "The Liberator." When she asserts her intention, they fall into disagreement about the character she intends to build for him based on certain assumptions.
5. "Life Made of Wood": An old wedding portrait speaks reams about the merits, traditions and values of the people in it. As time passes, it seems that some customs change, yet some people are still stuck in the old mentality.
6. "Twenty, Yet More (At the Last Station)": The story takes place at a special-education school for mentally-ill students. The mother is narrating her experience with her daughter Mona who has been enrolled in this school, as she shows frustration with the principal, the system, and society's attitudes.
7. "A Nationalistic Story": When a very expensive tablecloth goes missing from a store, the salesperson consults a cultured friend for help. Sarcastically, the friend refers to the matter as a nationalistic issue, as the word used for tablecloth in Arabic is a Turkish word and it becomes a symbol of deception and the misleading of people throughout history. Thinking he could restore his dignity by salvaging the tablecloth, the salesperson discovers that it was a tool of a big lie and the deception of his boss.
8. "One Hundred Stories and a Forest: A story of war, justice, and survival": The narrator tells a story of a girl who runs away from familial dangers and big issues. Facing fear by herself, she runs through woods that turn into a metaphoric fire. She then turns into a pine tree herself and finds refuge. So as war, the incidents of survival have been written in the story for the hundredth time.
9. "Chess": In this story, the craft of writing and its inspirations intermix. Unaware of her medical condition, the writer is inspired to write a story about an ambulance driver. To complete her writing mission, she must call the ambulance on a regular basis, at the same time every night.
10. "Awakening": Peeking through a hospital window, a ten year old younger self of the patient's memory is the narrator and an observer, while a doctor take notes of an experiment with a memory monitor. The young girl, being a memory, has the ability to

confuse time and sneak in and out of the monitor's wires to disturb the patient's memory and monitor recording, especially upon seeing a young man in the memory, remembering him paints a gloomy picture.

11. "The Smile": A bird teaches another how to conquer fear caused by war. The second bird learns how to overcome fear instead of hiding behind a fake smile.
12. "An Old Picture": A story of time, memory and delusion prompted by a white cat.
13. "Old Voices": A fictional boy who lacks a shadow follows the other children and collects the air around them with a paper cone. One day the little boy disappears, and when he reappears the secret of the cone is revealed to have been collecting expressions and words that are damaging.

From *Women Living in the Dark*:

1. "I Will Be There": Between the accusations of her mother and the nun at her school, the protagonist finds that lying is a way to survive curfews. However, when caught, she realizes that justifying herself will bring no understanding.
2. "Ali": When Mustafa discovers that he isn't his wife Wadha's true love, he resorts to taking her life.
3. "Cities without Soul": Stripped from everything that defines her as a person for the sake of feeding her children, the protagonist is forced to beg to make ends meet.
4. "All the Love I have is poured on to you": Zeina struggles with expressing love as she grew up in a Bedouin village where girls are not allowed to love.
5. "T.R.A.M.P.": A brother who is overly protective of his sister confuses her with another woman at the beach. After crossing the line when confronting her, the woman's husband and brother are provoked to hail him with thrashings.
6. "A Gateway to the Body": the maturation of a teenage girl's body raises the suspicions of her parents. They decide to send her to a Catholic boarding school in order to protect her from the lustful eyes of men. Her parents bring her home upon hearing a rumor.
7. "A Dagger-like Question": A young woman always tries to avoid a common inquiry, "Where are you headed?," that can be asked either innocently or with scrutiny. She is always defiant in her actions regardless of this inevitable question.
8. "Three Paintings": She is seventeen now and from the time of her marriage, at fourteen, to her cousin, she has faced in her closet the black dress she wore at her henna ceremony, which has been turned into three paintings.

9. "When my Donkey Died": Even at the age of eighteen, the protagonist is not ready for a new life, not when it entails a marriage, as she is content to help her married older brothers and tend to her pet donkey.
10. "Women Living in the Dark": The void of darkness itself and its walls witness women living in the dark. They, together with the voice of the women and the narrator, determine the status of the women who live in the dark.

From *The Windows are Dreadful Books*:

1. "The Windows are Dreadful Books": A man concerned about the wretchedness of the outside world falls victim to his own strange sense of justice.
2. "The War of Broka": A mother battles with teaching her son for what seems like an Arabic language exam. At the same time, she is confronted with her actual conflict in memory represented by the Broka area in her brain. Her mind starts wandering to different incidents in her academic life, acquiring knowledge at a time that coincides with wars in the region.
3. "Here the Sky Makes No Sound": A carpet weaver testifies to the judge about an accident that occurred involving one of her carpets. When convicted, she tries to convince the judge to let her take the carpet with her to jail.
4. "War has a Long Nose": A young woman has a big nose that she hates even more than war and the insistent expectations of getting married. Her desire to one day have plastic surgery has always been on her mind, but one day war takes care of that.
5. "The Domino Faces": A progressive divorced woman works selling trucks at a dealership. Dedicated to her work, she finds potential for a new relationship with the clients she meets at work. But they all seem chauvinistic and disappear one after another.
6. "Who Let the Curtains Down?": A woman living on a respiratory machine witnesses her life slip away and everything about her family life changes.

