

**THE STATUS OF ALGERIAN LITERATURE IN ITALY:
BETWEEN RANDOM APPROACHES AND THE
PERPETUATION OF STEREOTYPES**

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The aim of this article is to examine how Algerian literature is perceived among Italian academic scholars and how their perception affects the larger audience of the general reading public. First of all, it is necessary to set Algerian literature, translated into Italian within the framework of Arabic literature studies and to compare it with the translation of literature from other Arab countries. It is also essential to discuss the problem related to the original language this literature is translated from, and to determine if there is a difference in the assessment of Algerian literature translated from French and Arabic. Finally, consideration should be made of what Venuti (1998) calls 'translation's ethnocentric violence,' that is to investigate if and how translators influence – if it is the case – the assessment and reception of this literature in Italy.

The number of translations of Arabic literature published in Italy between 1900 and 1999 has increased from four titles published in 1900 to 112 in 1999 (Camera D'Afflitto, 2000). However this growth is not the result of any particular test project. Too often, the choice of translating a certain work depends on the personal relation the translator has with an author or publisher. An anomaly to note is that, very often, the author is not aware his or her works have been published in Italy. Consequently, no agreement is signed and no royalties paid to the author of the source Arabic text. There are almost thirty-two publishers dealing with Arabic literature in Italy and, considering the number of published translations, which do not correspond to an equal number of authors, there are more than eighty translators.

All the elements stated above undoubtedly contribute to shaping a view of Algerian literature and evaluating it. In Italy, Algerian literature has only just recently started to be considered as a self-studying object; in the past, in fact, one simply spoke of “Arabic literature”, as if only one big Arab country existed; the specificity of each single Arab country was not recognized, in line with the widespread belief whereby the Arab world is a monolith, and so its literature.¹ The publishing – and therefore translating – of novels written by *sharqi* authors (Arab authors from Egypt and the Middle East) was preferred due to historical reasons but also due to the ideological perspective that *sharqi* are “more Arab” than *maghrebi* authors (Arab authors from North Africa, that is, the Maghreb). It follows that, for example, there is a huge difference in the quantity between novels translated into Italian from the two regions.

The general low degree of interest in Arabic literature lasted till 1988, when the Egyptian writer Nagib Mahfuz won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Looking at the following table (figures relate to 1999), it emerges that during the period from 1900 to 1949 there were only 4 books translated from Arabic into Italian; not a single one during the period from 1950 to 1959; only two between 1960 and 1969, seven in the decade 1970-1979 and sixteen from 1980 to 1988 (Data taken from Camera D’Afflitto, 2000:132).

Translations of Arabic literature into Italian language(novel)					
1900-1949	1950-1959	1960-1969	1970-1979	1980-1988	1989-1999
4	0	2	7	16	112

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Table 1

After the award of the Nobel Prize to Nagib Mahfouz, one hundred and twelve translations from Arabic were published between 1989-1999 (I’ve taken into account only novels, excluding plays, poems, and short stories published in anthologies). The following points are in order. Firstly, considering that the total number of books published has increased, it can also be observed that during this last decade the number of published translations has remained constant, that is about ten a year. Secondly, looking at who the translated authors are, it can be noticed that big publishers prefer well known

writers, like Mahfuz and leave the job of promoting other writers to minor publishing houses. The latter do not have the same economic power, of course, and moreover are not well distributed throughout the national territory. Therefore the scholar and above all the non-specialist reader have to know in advance that a certain book will be on the market in order to purchase it directly from the publisher or through an alternative source.²

Finally, it can be noted that there are thirty-two publishers and eighty six translators. Therefore, this means that the majority of them are not full time translators and that they have only translated one book (usually they are students and the translation is the one presented for their dissertation in Arabic). As far as publishers are concerned, they do not have a composite project, therefore the choice of titles and authors to translate, too often, depends on haphazard reasons.³

As concerns Algerian literature, we have thirty-eight titles in Italian (excluding poems, plays, short stories, fairy tales and so on). In this list I have also omitted two authors, namely Nacera Chokra and Smari Abd elMalek who are Algerian but have written their first books in Italian.⁴ Moreover they have written only one book so far, and I define an author as someone who has written at least two (cf. Escarpit, 1992).

Algerian literature translated into Italian	
Begag A.	<i>Ladri di libri</i> , Edizioni Sonda, Torino 1993 ⁵
	<i>L'isola di Siloo</i> , Aiep, San Marino 1995
Benhaduga A.	<i>Domani è un altro giorno</i>, Jouvence, Roma 2003
Boudjedra R.	<i>Il ripudio</i> , Edizioni Lavoro, Roma 1993
	<i>La lumaca testarda</i> , Zanzibar, Milano 1991
	<i>La pioggia</i> , Edizioni Lavoro, Roma 1989
	<i>Timimun</i> , Edizioni Lavoro, Roma 1996

	<i>Topografia ideale per un'aggressione caratterizzata</i> , Marietti, Genova 1991
Bouraoui N.	<i>Una vita di sguardi</i> , Feltrinelli, Milano 1993
Charef M.,	<i>Le harki de Meriem. Una storia algerina</i> , Ibis, Como-Pavia 1993
Chouaki A.	<i>La stella di Algeri</i> , e/o, Roma 2003
Djaout T.	<i>L'invenzione del deserto</i> , Argo, Lecce 1998.
Djebar A.	<i>Bianco d'Algeria</i> , Il Saggiatore, Milano 1999
	<i>Donne d'Algeri</i> , Giunti Barbera, Firenze 1988
	<i>La donna senza sepoltura</i> , Il saggiatore, Milano 2002
	<i>Le notti di Strasburgo</i> , Il Saggiatore, Milano 2000
	<i>Lontano da Medina</i> , Giunti Barbera, Firenze 1993
	<i>L'amore, la guerra</i> , Ibis, Como-Pavia 1995
	<i>Nel cuore della notte algerina</i> ; Giunti, Firenze 1997
	<i>Ombra sultana</i> , Baldini & Castoldi, Milano 1999
Djemai A.	<i>Camping</i> , Nottetempo, Roma 2003
Haddad M.	<i>Una gazzella per te</i> , Mondadori, Milano 1960
Khadra Y.	<i>Cosa sognano i lupi</i> , Feltrinelli, Milano 2000
	<i>Doppio bianco</i> , e/o, Roma 1999
	<i>Le rondini di Kabul</i> , Mondadori, Milano 2003

	<i>Morituri, e/o, Roma 1998</i>
Khodja S.	<i>Donne d'Algeria, Pagano, Napoli 1994</i>
Lakhous A.	<i>Le cimici e il pirata, Arlem, Roma 1998</i>
Larej, W.	<i>Don Chisciotte ad Algeri, Mesogea, Messina 1999</i>
Mammeri M.	<i>Scali, Ibis, Como 1994</i>
Mimouni R.	<i>La tribù felice, Mondadori, Milano 1990</i>
Mokeddem M	<i>Gente in cammino, Astrea, Firenze 1994</i>
	<i>Storia di sogni e di assassini, Giunti, Firenze 1995</i>
Mostaghanem A.	<i>La memoria del corpo, Jouvence, Roma 1999</i>
Sebbar L.	<i>La ragazza la balcone, Mondadori, Milano 1999</i>
Yacine K.	<i>Nedjma, Jaca Book, Milano 1996</i>
Zaoui A.	<i>La sottomissione, Argo, Lecce 2003</i>
	<i>Stazione di monta per donne, Argo, Lecce 2002</i>

Table 2

Among these thirty-eight titles only four – in bold print in Table 2 – have been translated directly from Arabic. Of these, Lakhous has to be considered separately, as he lives in Italy, writes in Arabic, and but took part in the translation problem of his own novel. It can also be observed that of thirty-eight books, eight are by Assia Djébar, five by Rashid Boudjedra, four by Yasmina Khadra, two by Malika Moqaddem, two by Azouz Begag⁶ and two by Amin Zaoui. All together that makes six writers for twenty-three books translated into Italian, that is, seventy-six percent of the total of books published.

Looking at the dates of publishing one can distinctly discern two main blocks: the first, soon after the Algerian revolution (from 1962 up to 1966) and the second after 1992 (the majority of translations have been published after 1996). In this second group, moreover, ninety per cent of publications deal with young authors and disregard what has been written between 1970 and 1990, so that there seems to be a “lacuna of literature” lasting about twenty years.

We can therefore ask two questions: first, why does the editorial market prefer to translate from French? Second, why does it prefer to translate “young” authors? As for the first question, the aim is to convey the message that the Algerian intellectual does not speak Arabic but French and, above all, that in Algeria French and not Arabic is the language of culture. This explanation derives from two major observations: 1) the fact that some of these translations are published with the contribution of the French Ministry of Culture and/or the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (!) – and this could be a kind of cultural colonialism; and 2) from the reading of some Forewords to these books, which suggest very clearly, for example, that French is a “natural language” in Algeria and “was not imposed by force as, on the contrary, Arabic was”.⁷

As for the second question, one needs to think of what image of Algeria we are dealing with. Apart from the novels of well known authors like Djébar and Boudjedra, if one considers all the other writers we find that the plots have to do exclusively with fundamentalism and violence in the country and these books are exactly those which have a sponsor in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In brief, the Algerian novel translated into Italian contributes to the depiction of a country where murder is an everyday aspect of life, where women are subjugated and where there is no place for other features of life. Only “verbal blood” and sexual repression ooze out of its pages. This choice could have a meaning if it were followed by a critical analysis to explain what Mokhtari calls “the author’s vampirisation” in Algerian contemporary literature (Mokhtari, 2002:27-31). On the contrary, not only do we encounter these novels without any critical apparatus but what’s more, the reader often cannot find any information about the writer and his or her background.

Consider Yasmina Khadra as an example. His novels translated in Italian are only the detective ones and those where the subject is related to terrorism in countries different from Algeria, such as Afghanistan. The Italian market completely disregards his other novels, where he asks himself about the act of writing, and interrogates the intellectual’s role in society. This is

because in the detective novels we find the description of a corrupt power – Algerian – and we can easily forget that here we are dealing with “fiction”, therefore we transpose it to the field of evidence and fact (a mistake which, in my opinion, occurs too often in the Italian cultural field; the most remarkable examples being books like *Slaves!*, *Never without my daughter* or *Slave of my husband*, which are perceived as documentary by the general reading public).

Consider another example, the very recent publication of *La stella di Algeri* (the star of Algeria) by Aziz Chouaki (2003). At the end of the book, the publisher prints its catalogue and we do not find this book in the section “Literature of the Mediterranean, the Arab World and Israel” as expected, but in the section “African literature”. It seems that, for this publisher, an Algerian novel can be anything but Arab! In the same direction, I think we have to correct the aforesaid “lacuna of translated literature” of twenty years. This “lacuna” involves writers such as Mohamed Dib, Tahar Djaout, Tahar Wattar Abd elHamid Benhaduga, and so on or novels by Assia Djebar written between 1960 and 1979, like *Les Alouettes Naïves* (1997), a novel that marks a watershed in Algerian literature and in Arab literature as well, as it is the first to depict a love story. In brief, writers of the post revolution period writing in Arabic and works of writers – francophones – dealing with the subject of revolution are neglected (cf. Messaadi, 1990). Usually the reason evoked by publishers is that they are writers for the regime. Apart from the dubiousness of this statement, these are major writers in the Algerian panorama and bypassing them means to deprive the Italian reader of a key to understanding, and ultimately to a better intercultural encounter. This is generally the case with the translation of all Arabic literature into the major Western languages (cf. Faiq, 2004; Said, 1998).

How about the act of translating itself? Here too there are two different attitudes: that of translators from Arabic and the other of translators from French. In the opening of this article, I cited the ethnocentric's violence of translation, which is, as predicted, better shown in novels translated from French. Translators are usually scholars of French or, more frequently in the last few years, scholars of francophone literature of the Maghreb; of course they usually know French but rarely do they also know Arab and Algerian culture. Therefore on one hand one can find some “formal mistakes” such as omitting the -s of the French plural to Arab words (as for example in *hizbes*, *douars* and so on) or writing first names in the French way, which denotes that French culture is the only reference; on the other hand, as I already mentioned, point out there is not a project; the same author is never translated by the same translator and that the same translator changes his or her point of

view about Algerian literature in each foreword he or she writes. In contrast to what was quoted above about the “natural” aspect of French language in Algeria, we cite again a good translator from French, Daniela Marin, who in the foreword of the book *Scali* by Mulud Mammeri informs us that “French was a forced choice in Algeria at the time Mulud Mammeri wrote” (Mammeri, 1994: 10). *Scali* was published in 1991 and *Rose of Maghreb*, cited above was published in July 2003. As the political trend changes, the evaluation of literature changes. A first name translated in different ways – just as too many misprints in the text– means to deny a literature a cultural value. Not agreeing on how to translate the word “Allah”, for example, gives the attentive reader the feeling that the Algerian novel is “confused” from the formal point of view.

If it is true that some major Algerian writers have chosen (but how freely?) French to express themselves, it is also true that postcolonial Algerian literature, undoubtedly, has been written in Arabic.⁸ The idea that north African literature has been written in languages other than Arabic is false. The problem, on the contrary, lies in the politics of translation in European languages, in financial support the writers receive from international entities and above all in how North African literature is marketed to the European audience, the Italian one in particular. As the most prominent scholar of contemporary Arabic novel of the Maghreb, Bu Shasha Ibn Gema’a (1999), states, the Algerian novel written in Arabic is the avant-garde of Arab Maghrebi literature; it is therefore necessary to promote its diffusion into other languages, particularly into Italian.

A possible solution to the above mentioned problems could be a “solidarity” publisher, such as Seuil in France, who, in the frame of a composite project, commits itself to let books be translated by professionals, pay adequate royalties to authors and promote the knowledge of Algerian literature both among scholars and general reading public. Likewise translators should agree the transposition into Italian of key concepts relating to Arab culture and in particular the Algerian one.

The Algerian novel is ripe both from the aesthetic and topical points of view, and I strongly believe it deserves to be appreciated within a sensitive and sensible intercultural context.

Notes:

1. Scholars in Italy paid little attention to Algerian contemporary literature; I quote hereafter four articles published in *Oriente Moderno*, monographic number on The Arabic Literatures of the Maghreb: Tradition revised or Response to Cultural Hegemony?, XVI, 2-3, 1997 which contains four articles about the Algerian Literature written in Arabic as one of the very few examples. Usually the study of Algerian Literature is a matter of Francophone Departments which obviously occupy themselves only with francophone Algerian literature.
2. For the present research it took me six months to check all the titles and to purchase those I did not have. The problem was that they are often inserted in Collections where one would not expect to find them or are published by publishing houses which do not exist any more. A great help in this sense were internet bookshops, especially those which sell ancient books (should a book published in the sixties be considered “ancient”?).
3. From the date of the writing of this article for the workshop (December 2003) till the revised version (April 2004) some new translations were published. But nothing has changed: they are from French and to publish them a new publishing house was open, “epoche”, a joint venture with two major French publishers. The absence of a project is of self evidence if we take a look at the titles: a latest theatre work of Kateb Yacine, *Le cercle des represailles*, a novel of Mohamed Dib, *La grande maison* and the last book of Rashid Boudjedra, *Les funerailles*.
4. The trend in Italy is to consider these authors and the novels they write as *Italian* simply because they write in the Italian language, forgetting that pertaining to a certain Literature does not simply means to write in a certain language. It must also be noted that, usually, these novels are always revised by a native speaker and that their valuation is overestimated.
5. This book is inserted in a Children’s Collection.
6. Azouz Begag is inserted in this list because he is an Algerian of the second generation. For a complete list of Algerian authors in this sense, see: www.dzlit.free.fr the site of the Algerian Literature.
7. See *Rose del Maghreb*, a cura di Daniela Marin, Edizioni e/o, Roma 2003, Prefazione. (Actually we could also ask why Algerian Ministry of Culture does not promote the diffusion of Algerian Literature, but this would be the subject of another paper).

8. : Habib Sayah and Said Boutadjine could be cited here as examples of writers who are considered to have started new trend in the Algerian and the Arabic novel

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