
Rebecca Johnson’s book *Stranger Fictions* examines the emergence of the novel during the Arabic nahḍah. While this question has been the subject of many previous studies, Johnson’s work stands apart in that it puts so many key concepts related to this period in conversation with larger questions in literary studies. Translation, popular literature, serial publications, language reform, colonialism, and Christian missionary activities all figure prominently in the discussion. It is a testament to Johnson’s scholarly acumen that the analysis she produces in exploring these two questions is not restricted to the Arabic-language setting but contributes to broader discussions of the history of the novel as a genre.

Johnson’s investigation of the large corpus of translated literature that dominated literary serials of the long 19th century continues an exciting trend in nahḍawī studies. Histories of modern Arabic literature couched in a variety of nationalist circumstances tend to dismiss this large body of popular translation as incomplete, inconsequential, somehow not worthy of scholarly attention. In introducing her work, Johnson poses the question, “What would our account of modern Arabic literature look like if we incorporated these works as part of the history, rather than the shameful prehistory, of the Arabic novel?” (2). In answering this question, she discusses translations of *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and some of Jules Verne’s stories. As she explores the translation process in each of these translations, Johnson is careful to keep the focus on the relationship of each text to its historical context, rather than pitting the translations against the originals. This results in an excitingly global consideration of the ways in which different types of circulation have contributed to the unique flexibility and sensibility of the novel.

*Stranger Fictions* plays off the multiplicity of meanings contained in the adjective, “stranger”—particularly the various potentialities of its Arabic analog *gharīb*, from foreign to strange to wonderous to unexpected to unfamiliar. Johnson returns to this adjective throughout her work to highlight the degree to which novelistic discourse relies on various forms of transmission, translation, transportation, and transition. The constant negotiations of meaning, along with the inevitability of misunderstandings, misreadings, and mistranslations become the defining characteristic of the novel as a genre. Through the Arab authors and translators that she cites, Johnson shows how the modes of translation and circulation that characterize the emergence of novelistic discourse in the *nahḍah* are, in fact, characteristic of novelistic writing everywhere.
In this way, the European “originals” that she considers reveal their “stranger” origins and the disparity between the European and the Arabic novelistic traditions disappears.

The book is divided into two parts. Part One uses Buṭrus al-Bustānī’s 1890 translation of Robinson Crusoe as an entryway into a discussion of the close relationship between translation and novelistic discourse. This approach is a welcome departure from traditional discussions of the role of translation within the history of the novel in Arabic. In Johnson’s analysis, Bustānī’s Rūbinsūn Kurūzī becomes a true foil of Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe. Her assertion that novels are always “read in translation” proves a fascinating combination of Bakhtinian heteroglossia and postcolonial studies’ desire to push back against cultural narratives that automatically privilege a European center over a non-European periphery. Rather than simply comparing the translation to the original to analyze apparent differences between the two on the textual level, Johnson successfully connects Defoe’s “Crusoe” and Bustānī’s “Kurūzī” with the historical contexts in which each was created, thus allowing each an extraordinary measure of independence. Rather than simply rehashing familiar discussions of nahḍawi translation practices, Johnson engages in an actual comparative study of the two texts in which the tether of translation becomes an interesting tool for analysis, but not the single focus of the study.

This important distinction opens the door to a variety of interesting questions and lines of research. For example, Johnson looks into questions of readership and reading practices (building on the work of Samah Selim and Ami Ayalon), linguistic change and questions of newspaper language, and the role of transnational circulation in novelistic discourse wherever it emerged (again destabilizing narratives of unidirectional cultural flow from Europe to the rest of the world). What’s more, Johnson succeeds in laying significant groundwork for a discussion of literary developments during the nahḍah that does not rely on national identities or nationalist politics. She manages to focus on the Arab actors in their actual contexts as citizens of the Ottoman Empire dealing with a complex network of linguistic, sectarian, ethnic, and political affiliations. Johnson deftly uses this unique set of circumstances to consider the ways in which all novelistic discourse relies on such networks of exchange and translation, even if they manage to go largely unmentioned in many considerations of the novel as a genre.

The second part of Stranger Fictions uses other novels translated into Arabic (particularly works of Jules Verne and Alexandre Dumas) to examine the interplay between the technological changes taking place during the nahḍah and the work of authors, translators, and publishers at the time. Again, in this section Johnson drives home a simple yet profoundly important argument:
Arab authors and readers alike participated in global networks not as passive receptors of foreign (European) products, but “as participants in a worldwide reimagining of what constituted ‘the worldwide’” (115). Using the concept of connectivity as an organizing principle, Johnson illustrates how both Dumas’ French-language novel and its various Arabic translations explore the new spaces and possibilities created by new technologies of movement and communication.

Such a fruitful consideration of just a few nahḍawi translations underscores how much work remains to be done in this field. Beyond the Bustānis and the Shidyāqs stand legions of Arab translators whose work shaped the tremendous changes that the Arabic language and literary establishment witnessed throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, but whose influence has been written out of the accepted history of modern Arabic literature. Johnson opens her book with an anecdote from one Mikhā’il ‘Awrā, a relatively obscure nahḍawi author and translator. ‘Awrā’s appearance in the opening anecdote poses the question, “How important is this Mr. ‘Awrā? Does his position and argument merit a central position in this argument, or is this simply an example of cherry-picking a random essay that happens to support your argument?” After working through the different questions, approaches, and arguments that Johnson presents in Stranger Fictions, I found in her citation of ‘Awrā a challenge instead of a point for criticism: there is so much work yet to do in this important field of research. How many noteworthy translators and publications from this era remain unstudied? Even the longest running of the literary journals and newspapers of the time remain remarkably difficult to track down in complete editions, to say nothing of the more ephemeral (yet important) literary newspapers, journals, books, and speeches that have not been preserved. Johnson’s work makes a clear case for directing more resources toward preserving and studying this enormous archive of material.

Stranger Fictions is an important contribution to the arena of Arabic literary history in general, and particularly to nahḍawi studies. Perhaps more importantly, it is well-positioned to serve as an influential piece of literary criticism among the broader community of scholars working in European and comparative literatures, as it highlights networks of transmission and translation that play an important role in shaping the development of the novel on a global scale.

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