REPLY TO REVIEW


I found Abu-Haidar’s critique of The Eye of the Mirror (Reading: Garnet, 1995), which is my translation of Liana Badr’s ‘Ayn al-Mir`dt (Morocco: Tubaql Publishing, 1991), both disappointingly superficial and intellectually glib.

To begin with, Abu-Haidar fails to offer any significant literary analysis of the novel or any insights into it, simply confining herself to a brief outline of the plot. Her comments on my translation are equally skin-deep. She correctly points out that I have chosen to remain faithful to the original Arabic text, and concludes (very possibly due to the fact that both my name and biography indicate that I am an Arab) that my deliberate choice not to tamper with the Arabic expressions and phrases which the author carefully chose was simply due to linguistic incompetence on my part! Abu-Haidar does not seem to have troubled to ask herself whether or not the translator and copy-editor (the latter is indigenously British, by the way) purposely chose to preserve the style and flavour of the original Arabic text. After all, certain words and phrases defy logic in many different languages, and an author may have opted to use them for precisely that reason.

I would like to illustrate this by looking at some of the expressions which Abu-Haidar lists to try to bolster her argument.

She takes exception to “Thin, exhausted, her weakness causing her to almost spill onto the doorstep as she crossed it” (p. 75). Spilling over the doorstep sounds equally strange in Arabic. The Arabic word used by the author was tansakib, which I have never ever before seen used in such a manner in Arabic. In this instance and many others, Badr has made a deliberate effort to choose odd words as some sort of linguistic innovation. It would not have taken any linguistic feats on my part to use “fall over” or “trip” or “collapse” to make the text sound more logical and more ordinary, but that would have implied that Badr had used the equivalent verbs in the original Arabic.

Another example is “The constitution of the family’s men was capable of planting the seed of conception...” (p. 117). Again, nothing would have been easier than to rewrite this as “The men in the family were healthy enough to cause any woman to conceive...” or some other ordinary, mundane phrase which Abu-Haidar would consider to be compatible with “current English usage.” However, a second look at the text indicates that this phrase was part of a series of thoughts running through Um Hassan’s head as she pondered the possibilities of having a grandchild. Um Hassan was an elderly peasant whose ideas were both old-fashioned and informed by her agrarian background. It therefore seemed more appropriate to me to render that phrase literally than to deconstruct it, then reconstruct it in a more contemporary form. A modern Arab city woman would not have thought in the same way that Um Hassan did, and the author was clearly trying to make that point.

As for Abu-Haidar’s remark that my use of the word “paternalism” is inaccurate,
she fails to offer any explanation or qualification other than to mention that “fatherliness” could have been used. That seems to me to be more a matter of taste than of substance.

I was rather amused by Abu-Haidar’s objection to my translation of the Arabic word khubbaizah, (p. 109), which is a green leafy vegetable that grows wild (pronounced khubbeizeh in the Palestinian dialect). Abu-Haidar seems to have overlooked a previous occurrence of the word khubbeizeh in the narrative when Aisha glimpses her father’s hand over the plate of khubbeizeh (p. 24). As far as I know khubbeizeh is not part of the English-speaking world’s cuisine. However, spring greens are a similar leafy vegetable actually found at greengrocers’ shops and on supermarket shelves throughout Britain, and that word offered the nearest equivalent to which a British reader could relate. The alternative would have been to use the botanical name for this vegetable, which would have resulted in the introduction of some obscure Latin term into the text! However, Abu-Haidar either consciously chose to overlook my first translation of the word khubbeizeh into spring greens, or was unaware of it (which indicates a rather superficial reading of the text for a critic so intent on splitting hairs), or she simply agreed with my choice of “spring greens.”

I would now like to turn my attention to Abu-Haidar’s objection to my translation of the word khubbeizeh as “spring greens” for the second time in the narrative. I believe that it is essential to look at the entire passage in which the word occurs, not to simply consider the word out of context as Abu-Haidar does. Here is the passage:

Um Hassan moved her hands as though she were protecting her face from a breeze in the fields. Throwing her head back, she said: “We had fig trees, grape vines and olive trees. A woman used to go to the fields and work with her man. She was just like him. They used to harvest lentils and wheat... I had Hassan when I was sixteen. The month I had him, we fled and left home.... We came out of Palestine. We were in the orchards picking olives when Assafaaf, which was the nearest village to us, fell.... As Um Hassan spoke, a cloud would move across her face, and another would quickly replace it. As she reminisced about the land, the figs and the spring greens, bright rainbow colours would shine in her eyes and on her skin. (p. 109)

So, if the author had actually wanted to tell us that Um Hassan was reminiscing about “the greenery of the countryside” as Abu-Haidar is suggesting, why did she use the Arabic word khubbeizeh? There is no dearth of words or phrases in Arabic for “country greenery.” Understanding the context in which the word occurs is, in my view, a key factor in determining which synonym to use when translating it, or which equivalent to use if an acceptable synonym does not exist. In the above passage, Um Hassan was nostalgically recounting the bounty of the land in Palestine as part of what has become a memory of an idyllic existence there before the Palestinian exodus. The old peasant woman is telling her daughter-in-law about the fig trees, grape vines and olive trees her family possessed. She is drawing a comparison between the plenty in which she and her peasant family lived as they tilled the land and harvested their produce, and the life of miserable poverty and hardship after the exodus. The reference is to edible country greenery, not just to generic green grass, bushes or shrubs.

As for my command of current English usage, it strikes me as rather ironic that I find myself in the odd position of having to state that I am fully and totally bilingual. I very much doubt that my dispatches would have been published by the Washington Post, or that my unedited voiced reports would have ever aired on the