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The Reality of Arabic Fiction Translation into English: A Sociological Approach

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Abstract

English translations of texts associated with Arabic fiction remain largely unexplored from a sociological perspective. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, this paper aims to examine the genesis of Arabic fiction translation into English as a socially situated activity. Works of Arabic fiction emerged in English translation in the early twentieth century. Since then, this intellectual field of activity has gone through three distinct, though overlapping, phases that have affected its structure, capital at stake, agents involved, modes of production, and the volume of activity. This paper also aims to argue for a fourth phase which could be referred to as 'post 9/11 phase' and will investigate its agents and dynamics. The field of Arabic fiction translation into English was subjected to both internal and external factors which formed and conditioned its structure and dynamics. In contrast to the linear understanding of the history of Arabic fiction translation, Bourdieu's sociological concepts of *field* and *capital* will be used as analytical tools to both describe and interpret the translation activity in this field.

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1. Introduction

The literary genre of fiction is perceived as a rich source of material for translation by many. Allen (2003, p. 1) states that “in translation as in creative writing”, fiction is considered “the most frequently encountered literary medium in contemporary publishing”. This paper aims to study the translations of Arabic fiction into English as socially situated activities, or as Hermans (1997, p. 10) puts it “a socially regulated activity”. This in turn, means that translation is affected by translators and other agents who might be involved in the translation process. It also means that translations always reflect the historical and cultural conditions under which they are produced (Wolf, 2007). In this context, the analysis of the social dimensions of translation helps us to understand that “the viability of a translation is established by its relationship to the cultural and social conditions under which it is produced and read” (Venuti, 1995, p. 18).

The idea of representing the social world as a space, constructed on the basis of distinction and constituted by a set of properties and power relations between participants within that space, is at the heart of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of *field*, which was developed to refer to a socially organised, quasi-autonomous space that has definable boundaries, and his concept of *capital*, in its materialised and embodied forms, this paper seeks to investigate the genesis of the translations of Arabic fiction into English. The two concepts will be used as analytical tools to examine the dynamics and boundaries of a postulated field that could be called ‘the field of Arabic fiction translation into English’.

2. Translations of Arabic Fiction into English: The Genesis of the Field

As Bourdieu (2005) contends, it is necessary to account for the *social space* within which interactions and events take place. The *social space* Bourdieu is referring to here is what he calls *field* (Grenfell, 2008). Bourdieu (1990, p. 87) explains that “fields are historically constituted areas of activity with its specific institutions and laws of functioning”. He

further argues that, any field is occupied by agents who acknowledge and refer to its history and structure (Bourdieu, 1990).

Bourdieu’s concept of *field* is premised on the idea of struggle between agents over ‘stakes’ and ‘capital’, which may be field-specific or generic (Bourdieu, 1990), and that:

The existence of specialized and relatively autonomous field is correlative with the existence of specific stakes and interests; via the inseparably economic and psychological investments that they arouse in agents endowed with certain habitus, the field and its stakes (themselves are produced as such by power relations and struggle in order to transform the power relations that are constitutive of the field) produce investments of time, money, work, etc. In other words, interest is at once a conditioning of the function of the field, in so far as it is what ‘gets people moving’, what makes them get together, compete and struggle with each other, and a product of the way the field functions (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 88).

The struggle between the various agents legitimizes the stakes themselves, and determines which stakes hold what value (Warde, 2004). In other words, the existence of a field with positions presupposes and creates a conviction on the part of the participants in the authenticity and worth of the capital at stake in the field (Jenkins, 2002). Also central to Bourdieu’s concept of field is that a social field comprises social positions occupied by social agents who could be individuals, institutions, or organizations. What can be done in a field is shaped and informed by its rules of participation, boundaries, and participating agents.

Relevant to Bourdieu’s concept of *field* is his concept of *capital*. The Bourdieusian understanding of capital is wider than its economic reference. For Bourdieu (1986, p. 243) capital includes “monetary and non-monetary, as well as tangible and intangible forms”, and can present itself in three distinguishable forms:

1. Economic capital: refers to monetary income and other financial resources and finds its institutional expression in the form of property rights.
2. Cultural capital: refers to non-financial assets, such as educational qualifications, which could promote social mobility beyond economic means (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).
3. Social capital: refers to the network of social 'connections' or memberships to certain organisations. According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital can be seen as one of the several resources used to obtain or maintain positions of power within a field.

Symbolic capital is another form of capital suggested by Bourdieu. It is a manifestation of each of the other forms of capital when they are naturalised on their own terms (Bourdieu, 1990). That is to say, symbolic capital is the resources available to a social agent on the basis of prestige or recognition, which functions as an authoritative embodiment of cultural value.

For the benefit of this paper, it is *economic*, *social*, and *symbolic* capital that are particularly relevant to the examination of the field of Arabic fiction translation into English.

The field of Arabic fiction translation into English is not rigid but dynamic, and its boundaries are not static limits determined once and for all. Boundaries, in reality, are determined by internal and external factors. The former relates to the struggle between occupants and 'the rules of the game' within the field, and the latter relates to the relationship between the field of fiction translation and the field of power.

The points of entry of any field, i.e., its limits, which are institutionally established, are "situated at the points where the effects of the field cease" to have any influence or consequence on practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 100). Bourdieu argues that the boundaries of the field can only be determined by an empirical investigation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Jenkins, 2002). This means that the boundaries of the field of fiction translation can only be assessed by

studying the field's structure, i.e., the objective relations between the field and its occupants, and between the field in question and other fields.

Arabic fiction, for the purpose of this paper, is defined as the bulk of narrative prose works, i.e., novels, novellas, and short stories, written in Arabic. Thus, in conformity with this definition, this paper will only encompass the Arabic fiction output originally written in Arabic and translated into English.

Although the modern Arabic fiction tradition started with the emergence of the novel genre in the mid/late nineteenth century, it was the Arabic short story that thrived first into a developed mature genre (Jayyusi, 2008). The pioneers of Arabic fiction were mainly a small group of avant-garde writers who "have drunk from other springs and look[ed] at the world with different eyes" and were eager to explore the new literary writing genres, bridge the gap between the classical and the modern, and raise the standard of literary taste in the region (Gibb, 1962, pp. 246-7). It was at some unspecified point in time during the twentieth century that the fiction genre superseded poetry as the most dominant literary form in the Arab world, and it has maintained ascendancy ever since (Allen, 2003). This phase of growth and transformation was marked by the emergence of the Arabic novel, the development of the short story, as well as the birth of other new literary forms and genres.

Altoma (1996; 2000; 2005) argues that there are three identifiable thresholds or "phases" along the evolution of the field of translating Arabic fiction into English. This paper will argue for a fourth phase which will be discussed in detail later. These four distinct, though overlapping, phases are the initial phase, expanding phase, post-Nobel phase, and post-9/11 phase.

3. The Initial Phase (1908 – 1967)

Although Altoma (2005) identified this phase as beginning in 1947, it has been possible to trace the first English translation of a work of Arabic fiction back to 1908. That was Frank Nurse's translation of Shukri Khuri's 1902

novella *al-Tuḥfah al-‘ammīyah aw qiṣṣat Finyānūs*, which was rendered as *The Pitiful Pilgrimage of Phinyanus*. Between 1908 and 1947 only a small number of translated short stories and novels were sparsely published (Altoma, 2005).

During this phase, little or no attention was given to translating and/or translated Arabic fiction into English by either English publishers or English reading public. Among the attributing factors to this disinterestedness in Arabic fiction are:

- 1- The late development of modern Arabic fiction seems to have coincided with the reservations expressed by various orientalisks about the appeal and literary value of Arabic fiction, either in translation or in original form. These reservations are manifest in Gibb's (1963, p. 161) statement that Arabic "short stories, novels, and plays, remain bounded by the horizons and conventions of the Arab world: when translated into other languages they are often more interesting as social documents than as literary achievements".
- 2- The lack of specialists with adequate knowledge of the Arabic language and culture seems to have helped promote the idea that Arabic has an inherent disadvantage. Due to this limited familiarity with the Arabic language and culture, and because of the umbilical relationship between 'Arabic' and 'Islam', Arabic was regarded in the Anglo-American sphere, and the West in general, as a "louche" and "controversial language". It was also seen as being intrinsically untranslatable or "unapproachable" and has nothing to offer (Said, 1990, p. 278).
- 3- The hegemony of English, and the rise of the English culture's sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency resulted in perceiving Arabic literature/fiction as being of "lesser significance than the tastes of the Anglophone reading public" (Clark, 2000, p. 4).

It was through the efforts of some persevering individuals, who endeavoured to introduce Arabic fiction to the English speaking world

and make it accessible by means of translation, that a field of Arabic fiction translation began to formulate. The task of these individuals was not by any means easy but rather long and arduous. During this phase, translations were not voluminous for finding a publisher was a difficult task. Büchler and Guthrie (2011, p. 20) state that during this phase "it was almost impossible to find a publisher willing to take on an Arabic book in translation". In an attempt to change the trend of the publishing market, the exponent translators of Arabic fiction paid more attention to translating short stories than novels. Although the reasons for this can be ascribed to the dominant position enjoyed by the short story in the field of modern Arabic fiction at that time, one could argue that these reasons relate primarily to the fact that it was easier to have translated short stories published by means of squeezing them in periodicals and intellectual journals.

In his *Bibliography of Modern Arabic Fiction in English Translation*, Alwan (1972) was able to cite a handful of English translations of Arabic novels and as little as 200 short stories up until that time. The selection of what to be translated was largely driven by the translators themselves, and it seemed that it had little to do with the works literary merits. Rather the selection was based on either the translators' personal preference and their awareness of a particular author's prominence in their own culture, or having a personal relationship with the author. This process indeed resulted in a "sporadic and haphazard" translation flow of Arabic fiction into English (LeGassick, 1992, p. 48).

The year 1932 witnessed the publication of the first translated Arabic novel. E.H. Paxton translated the first part of Taha Hussein's tripartite autobiographical novel *Al-Ayyām* (published in Arabic in 1929) as *An Egyptian Childhood*. The second part of Hussein's memoirs appeared in Arabic in 1939 and was published as an English translation in 1943. This time the translation was undertaken by Hilary Wayment as *The Stream of Days*. The third part, however, came out in Arabic in 1967 and appeared in English in 1976. The novel was rendered by Kenneth Cragg as *A Passage to France*. Kuiper (2009, p. 107)

states that *Al-Ayyām* is the “first modern Arab literary work to be acclaimed in the West”.

1947 witnessed an upturn in the number of translations of Arabic fiction into English. The second translation of an Arabic novel was Tawfiq Al-Hakim's 1937 *Yawmīyāt nā'ib fī al-aryāf*, by Aubrey (Abba) Eban, who translated the novel in 1947 as *Maze of Justice*. This was followed by Abdel- Rahman Al-Sharqawi's *Egyptian Earth* in 1962; Mahmoud Taymour's *The Call of the Unknown* in 1964; Al-Hakim's *Birds of the East* in 1966; and Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*, the first novel of the Nobel Laureate to appear in English translation, in 1966. Significant among the publishers of this period was the Lebanese publisher Khayyat. He published books and reprinted classical Arabic literature works produced by other publishers such as Brill and Leipzig. It seems that this have secured him some social and symbolic capital in the Arabic literary field. Between 1961 and 1966 he published English translations of four Arabic fiction works, the last of which was Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*. It was reported by Mahfouz, however, that “neither [him] nor the translator made any money because Khayyat cheated [them]” (El Shabrawy, 1992). Such events did not help the process of finding a publisher as will be shown later.

The role played by Denys Johnson-Davies, or the “doyen of translators” as Allen (2003, p. 2) describes him, in expanding the field of Arabic fiction translation into English during this phase cannot be overlooked. Johnson-Davies, a Muslim-convert who studied Arabic at Cambridge and has lived in and travelled to several Arab countries, is “notable for his numerous, highly successful and well received translations” (Altoma, 2005, p. 55). *Tales from Egyptian Life* was his first translated collection of short stories written by Mahmoud Taymour in 1947. The translation was published in Cairo in 1949 by Renaissance Bookshop at Johnson-Davies's own expense (Johnson-Davies, 2007). In the 1960s, he initiated a quarterly literary magazine in London to publish in translation “many of [his] own favourite writings” (Johnson-Davies, 2006, p. 69). Spanning only twelve issues between 1961 and 1963, the magazine was influential

in presenting the avant-garde Arabic fiction writers, albeit mostly short story writers, to the Anglophone world.

It was not until 1967 that his second collection of translated short stories was published by Oxford University Press. The publication was fortuitous according to Johnson-Davies (2007). In this collection he introduced a wide selection of short stories from different parts of the Arab world. Johnson-Davies' social capital aided his efforts in progressing the field of Arabic fiction translation. It was through one of his friends that he managed to get his second collection published. Johnson-Davies states that he “knew somebody who knew somebody” at Oxford University Press (Johnson-Davies, 2006, p. 46). Social capital, which is the network of relationships that agents could deploy to achieve dominance, consecrate their positions or increase their assets, is manifest in this incident. It is safe to argue that was it not for Johnson-Davies' social capital the collection may have not been published, which would consequently impact on the field's activity. This illustrates the important role played by Johnson-Davis in the development of the field. The anthology, writes Johnson-Davies (2006), “was accepted for publication as a work of scholarship rather than of any literary merits it might have; there was also one condition: that a scholar of distinction should write an introduction to it” (p. 46). This condition was met when Arthur Arberry accepted to write the introduction. This prerequisite highlights the value of symbolic capital and the role it played in the development of the field of Arabic fiction translation into English.

The mode of circulation and consumption and subsequently the growth of the field seem to have been affected by external socio-political factors. Johnson-Davies (2007) states that “the book came out at an unfortunate time – the Arab-Israeli conflict – and most people's sympathies were not with the Arabs. While sales in England were not particularly good, not a single copy of the book was bought by any Arab government or institution”. However, according to Said (1990, p. 280), although Arab writers, publishers, and governmental bodies “have done hardly anything to promote” their literary works, this

trend of governmental support was slightly reversed in later phases.

The twenty years gap between the publication of the first and second translated collections “illustrate not only the ‘difficulty of finding a publisher for Arabic literary works . . . but, more importantly the marginality assigned to Arabic literature in general” in the Anglo-American world (Altoma, 2000, p. 65). The number of translations was not inspiring according to Altoma (2005), who states that between 1947 and 1967 there were only sixteen English translations of Arabic fiction works, as a direct result of the reasons previously cited.

It was in the 1960s that a considerable number of Arabic fiction works appeared in English translation. The role played by the American ‘National Defence and Education Act’ of 1958 significantly helped delineate the boundaries of the field. Aimed at providing the US with “specific defence oriented personnel” the Act offered federal support to modern foreign languages learning, literature scholarly research, and encouraged universities to appoint people with expertise in this area (Rhoton, 2010, p. 291). Arabic was re-introduced as one of these “modern foreign languages”. Section 602 of the Act asserts that:

The Commissioner is authorized, directly or by contract, to make studies and surveys to determine the need for increased or improved instruction in modern foreign languages and other fields needed to provide a full understanding of the areas, regions, or countries in which such languages are commonly used, to conduct research on more effective methods of teaching such languages and in such other fields, and to develop specialized materials for use in such training, or in training teachers of such languages or in such fields (p. 1594).

The above statement demonstrates what Bourdieu refers to as the external factors that may affect any social field, in this case, the field of translating Arabic fiction; where the needs of the American Ministry of Defence led

into increased activity in the field. This illustrates that the field of translation in general, and translation of Arabic fiction in particular, is informed and influenced by its relationship with the field of power, i.e., the field of politics.

Although Arabic was being taught at some universities before the 1960s, it was considered as an ancient dead language and was categorised along with classical Greek and Latin. Despite its aesthetic characteristic, long history, and artistic uniqueness, the Arabic language was “somehow not respectable [and] consequently dangerous” language to be studied and/or translated, argues Said (1990, p. 278).

The influence of the American policy on translation was not confined to the US; rather it spread into other countries, such as the UK. The signing of the ‘National Defence and Educational Act’ into law in the US in 1958 spurred the academic institutions in the UK to offer similar courses on modern languages and cultures too. For example, in 1964, the University of Oxford appointed Mohamed Badawi as its first specialist in modern Arabic literary studies (Allen, 2009). The need for English translations of Arabic literature to suffice for these newly introduced courses has persuaded some of the academic publishers to produce their own translations.

4. The Expanding Phase (1968 – 1988)

Altoma (2005, p. 55) refers to the period from 1968 to 1988 as the “phase of expanding”. It commences with what could be described as an academic translation mini-boom of Arabic fiction into English. Translation activity in this period aimed mainly at enriching the content of modern Arabic literature courses, which began to emerge rapidly across the Anglo-American world. This increased activity helped the dissemination and appreciation of modern Arabic fiction, despite the limited number of students interested in studying classical Arabic literature. Outside the academic realm, Arabic fiction was still considered rather insignificant and had a very limited English public readership. The number of translations produced by academic institutions during this phase was considerable

compared to the previous one. However, these translations did not receive wide plaudits, and the quality of most of them was subject to question.

For this phase, Altoma (2005) was able to list approximately sixty Arabic novels and forty short story collections published as English translations. The list, however, shows the predominance of Egyptian writers at the expense of other Arab writers. He suggests that Egypt played a central role in the development of the field of translation of Arabic literature since the nineteenth century. He also argues that the activity of translating Egyptian fiction in particular has increased as a result of the support of some institutions operating inside and outside Egypt. Büchler and Guthrie (2011, p. 20), however, cited the West's long colonial links with Egypt and its dominance over the other realms of cultural activities in the Arab world as possible reasons for the Egyptian dominance. Another possible reason for the prevalence of Egyptian works and writers is suggested by Eban (1944) who, in relation to the status of Egypt and its literature in the Arab world and Islam, argues that:

Egypt belongs geo-graphically, historically, and culturally to the Hellenic world. It is as Mediterranean as Italy or France. On several occasions, before Islam had seen the light of day or any Arab foot had trodden on Egyptian soil, Egypt had been a centre, sometimes the main centre, of Hellenic civilization . . . It is true that an Eastern religion-Islam- had spread through Egypt in the seventh century; but this no more changed her essentially Hellenic nature than the spread of an Oriental religion-Christianity-had changed the Hellenic outlook of Europe and converted that Continent to an Eastern viewpoint. It is mere superstition therefore to regard Egypt as an Oriental country, and gross reaction to keep any distance between her and the European culture, Hellenic in its origin, which she had fostered and preserved . . . Egypt in short is the partner of Europe as the joint heir of the Hellenic tradition and must be a partner

in the new age of technical development (pp. 174-5).

He further argues that:

Egyptian literature will dominate the Arabic literary world largely because of this disparity between its own copiousness and the aridity which prevails elsewhere; but mostly because it has achieved the synthesis between modernism and Muslim tradition; so that in accepting Western ideas, the Arabic-speaking world does not have to forgo the staple diet whereby, for fifteen centuries, it has been nurtured and sustained (p. 178).

One of the noteworthy changes in the field during this phase was the Anglo-American culture's increased tendency to and interest in translating Arabic fiction works written by young women writers. Three factors coincided to instigate the surge of this mode of translation: First, the rise of the feminist movement in the West, second, the emergence of works by talented Arab women-writers who sought an outlet to their views and concerns in writing fictional works, and third, the general Anglo-American desire to propagate the opinions of these Arab women-writers, and to have an insight into their "perspectives about other political and social issues in their respective countries" (Altoma, 1996, p. 138). Nawal El-Saadawi was, and still, the most translated Arab woman-writer. Her mainly feminist fiction literature has received wide acclaims in the West, especially in the Anglo-American culture, due to her "radical and outspoken portrayal of women's conditions in Egypt and Arab societies than to the intrinsic literary value of her works" (Altoma, 2005, p. 56).

A number of translation initiatives and publishers ought to be acknowledged for their efforts in introducing Arabic fiction to the Anglo-American world during this phase. Following the success of its African Writers series, which was launched in 1962 and included some works by Arab writers who happened to be also Africans, the London-based Heinemann Educational Books, on recommendation by the pioneer of Arabic

literature translation Denys Johnson-Davies, made a decision in the 1970s to establish a new Arab Authors series.

It was Johnson-Davies' personal relationship with James Currey, who was in charge of the African Writers series, that led to the introduction of the work of some Arab writers in that series. Subsequently, this led into the introduction of the Arab Authors series with the aim of introducing new non-African Arab authors to the Anglo-American reading public through translation. Johnson-Davies states that when he knew of the African Writers series, he suggested to Currey that it would be better if the series included other authors such as Alifa Rifaat, Tayeb Salih, Tawfiq Al-Hakim, and Naguib Mahfouz, all of whom were African-Arabs. His suggestion was approved, which re-demonstrates how his social capital helped increase the volume of activity in the field of Arabic fiction translation into English. However, he "was soon faced with the problem of where to slot works by Palestinian and Iraqi writers. Soon, it was agreed to launch a new series under the title Arab Authors" (Johnson-Davies, 2007).

Johnson-Davies was the consultant editor to the Arab Authors series and most of the translations were either carried out by him or conducted under his supervision. The series was mainly targeting Anglophone "ordinary readers" and aimed at presenting the Arab authors writings "as works of literature, rather than as academic documents or works of anthropology" (Tresilian, 2010). This represents a canonical shift in the field of translating Arabic fiction as a result of the emergence of a new mode of production. Arabic fiction in English translation started to be read as a work of literature rather than a scholarly document. The only criticism levelled against the Arab Authors series, argues Young (1980, p. 149), is that "its title 'Arab Authors' claims rather too much" for most of the writers represented in the series were Africans, especially Egyptians and Sudanese, and that some of the works were previously included already in the African Writers series.

Following a take-over of Heinemann in the late 1980s, and given that the Arab Authors

series "did not match the commercial success of the African series", the new owners decided to discontinue publishing the Arab Authors series (Clark, 2000, p. 11). Furthermore, Heinemann cited the lack of market success and profit as reasons for the series' suspension (Tresilian, 2010). On the basis of these statements one could argue that economic capital influenced the growth and contraction of the field of Arabic fiction translation. The decision of what and what not to translate was not based on the work's literary value and merit but rather on its anticipated economic value. In other words, the decisions on which authors to include and which authors to exclude in the series seems to have been based on the anticipated economic yield of their translated works for the English reading public. This is supported by Young's (1980, p. 148) statement that some of the works had "appeared before in Heinemann's 'African Writers' series", which was economically successful. Although it was discontinued, the Heinemann Arab Authors series helped bring about some awareness of modern Arabic literature in general, and Arabic fiction in particular. It also helped put Arabic literature on the world literary map.

Heinemann occupied a dominant position in the field of Arabic fiction translation into English in the UK. Similarly, there were two main publishers dominating the field in the US. Heinemann's analogues in the US were Three Continents Press and Biblioteca Islamica in Minneapolis. Although both publishers were relatively inexperienced in the 1970s, they expressed willingness to publish the works of Arab authors despite the unpredictability attached to Arabic fiction at that time. However, their enthusiasm convinced them "that works from the literary tradition of such a large part of the world should be of interest to the scholarly reading public and, it was hoped, to a still broader market" (Allen, 1994, p. 165). The translations produced as part of the Middle Eastern Literatures Series by Biblioteca Islamica's Studies, and the ones published by Three Continents Press played a pivotal role in bringing Arabic literature/fiction into the attention of the English readership. Altoma (2005, p. 57) states that Three Continents Press played a "pioneering role in promoting the translation of modern Arabic literature".

Donald Herdeck, the founder of Three Continents Press, believed that there was “a lot of prejudice in this country [the US] against blacks and against Arabs, against Islam. There is a lot of crookedness in covering the whole idea of writing that comes from the Third World” (Burness, 1992, p. 101). Herdeck wanted to correct this misconception and fill that void (Burgess, 1982).

Herdeck frequently criticised the American society’s attitude, and the country’s publishing policy, towards translations. He described America as “mono-cultural linguistically” and the publishers as being “notorious for avoiding much investment of time and dollars in translations” (Anderson, 1999, p. 35). He further argues that unless “there is a Nobel Prize involved, there is not much interest overall, and even surprise if the author is not European” (Anderson, 1999, p. 35). Herdeck’s statements illustrate some of the external factors that affected the structure of the field and did not help the production, dissemination, and consumption of Arabic fiction in English translation. The American mind set and the publishing policies, which were motivated by economic capital in the main, restrained the activity in the field.

This phase has also witnessed the birth of the first “organised project devoted to a systematic process of translation” from Arabic into English (Allen, 2003, p. 4). Based in Boston and London, and founded and directed by the renowned Palestinian poet and critic Salma Khadra Jayyusi, the Project of Translation from Arabic (PROTA) was launched in the late 1970s. PROTA was tasked by Columbia University Press to prepare a large anthology of modern Arabic literature and the project was funded by the Iraqi Ministry of Information and Culture. Dissatisfied with the paucity, as well as the mode, of translation production from Arabic into English, PROTA implemented a new translation methodology and made “the dissemination of Arabic culture and literature abroad” its mission (Allen, 1994, p. 166). According to Allen (2003, p. 4), PROTA’s translation methodology encompassed a two-fold procedure: “the first is that of rendering the source text into a readable English version, the second the use of an Anglophone litterateur to adapt the intertext

to styles and structures of contemporary Anglo-American readerships”.

The efforts of PROTA’s small group of editors, translators, and advisors bore fruit in the publication of a considerable number of studies on Arabic literature and culture as well as translations in the form of anthologies or individual works both in the US and the UK. In 1992, Jayyusi initiated the East-West Nexus project to work hand in hand with PROTA in disseminating the history, literature, and culture of the Arabs in the English speaking world. This initiative by Jayyusi was mainly to allow PROTA to focus exclusively on translating Arabic literature.

The field of Arabic fiction translation into English was influenced by agents located outside the English speaking world. The contributions of two publishers in particular were noteworthy with regard to the development of the field. These were The General Egyptian Book Organization (GEBO) and The American University in Cairo Press (AUCP). Each published a series of translations of modern Arabic fiction. Perceiving translation as a means of “understanding the other” and a way of promoting a better understanding of the Arab culture, GEBO, a state owned and run publisher, initiated its Contemporary Arabic Series in the 1970s (<http://www.gebo.gov.eg/>). Most of the translations produced by GEBO were, however, for Egyptian fiction writers, and the translations themselves were primarily carried out or revised by Egyptians. Although the initiative was called off in 2002, and the translations were hard to obtain outside Egypt, the 75 titles published by GEBO constituted a significant addition to the repertoire of translated Arabic, albeit mostly Egyptian, fictional works available in English.

The other agent in the field was the American University in Cairo Press. Through its project Arabic Literature in Translation, the AUCP has managed to produce a stream of translations of fictional works from across the Arab world. The influence of AUCP on the field was not restricted to the process of selecting works for translation; it also influenced the translation process itself. AUCP had its own translation methodology which

demanded that “four different translators engaged in translating a single book. An Arab translator would do a preliminary rendering, which would be followed by other translators with different degrees of experience adding their own alterations” (Johnson-Davies, 2007). This new mode of production caused tension in the field and was contested by other agents. Johnson-Davies challenged AUCP’s approach by arguing that: “I feel that since it took one writer to write a book, it should not require more than one translator to translate it” (Johnson-Davies, 2007).

Although AUCP started its Arabic literature translation project in 1972, it did not possess the means to produce books; therefore, it was forced to forge partnership agreements with other publishers in the US and the UK, in particular with Heinemann and Three Continents Press. It is argued here that due to the internal dynamics of the field of Arabic fiction translation into English, key players, e.g., Heinemann, Three Continents Press, and the AUCP, had to resort to cooperation and consolidation between themselves to strengthen and expand the boundaries of the field. However, this trend changed after the Nobel Prize in 1988, which in turn led to the rise of other forms of capital in the field, as will be discussed later. This may be interpreted as a critique to Bourdieu’s concept of *field* which is premised on the idea of struggle between agents, and would consequently raise the question; could co-operation rather than confrontation provide the dynamics of any field of activity?

The first outcome of this cooperation was the publication of Naguib Mahfouz’s *Miramar* (1978). The novel was translated by Fatma Moussa, and revised by Maged El-Kommos and John Rodenbeck, who was then the director of the AUCP. In order “to get the book sold”, and to add some symbolic value to the translation, Rodenbeck asked the British novelist John Fowles to write the introduction to the translation (Jobbins, 2002).

It should be noted here that prior to Mahfouz being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1988 the AUCP did not take an active interest in translating Arabic fiction into English. Rodenbeck was once quoted by Christopher

Wren (1980, p. 22) commenting on the genre’s “limited appeal” in the Anglophone world and wondering “why should you bother to translate something that is going to be read by specialists anyway?”. Despite the many question marks surrounding its monopolising of the market of modern Arabic fiction in English translation, it has played a pivotal role in shaping the field and is now a publishing giant in the field of translating Arabic fiction: owning exclusive worldwide publication rights of works penned by Mahfouz and whoever wins the AUCP Mahfouz Medal for Literature. Büchler and Guthrie (2011, p. 24) quoted Paul Starkey, a prominent translator and professor of Arabic at Durham University stating that:

AUCP – a frustrating organisation to work with in some respects, and with miserable rates of pay, but still commendable in many respects, in terms of making available a body of literature that they can’t really be making any money out of.

The role played by niche publishers who emerged during this phase both in the UK and the US was instrumental in introducing modern Arabic fiction to the English speaking world. The London-based Quartet Books and Saqi Publications, owned by people from the Arab world, published translations of important Arabic fiction works, some of which were authored by previously unknown writers from across the region. In the US, it was Three Continents Press and Biblioteca Islamica who played a major role in and contributed significantly to establishing the postulated field of Arabic fiction translation into English.

5. The Post-Nobel Phase (1988-2001)

Awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature to Naguib Mahfouz in 1988 marked a turning point in the history of the field of Arabic fiction translation into English. The award brought a wide international attention to Arabic literature in general, and for the first time since the emergence of the field, Arabic fiction was the focus of a worldwide interest. According to Altoma (2005, p. 57), the post-Nobel phase was “a striking departure from earlier phases”. The number of new English translations of Arabic fiction, as well as

reprints of existing works rose rapidly and consistently as a result of the increasing market demand. The field, also, witnessed a change in the mode of production during this period. After an initial period when translation of Arabic fiction was entirely dependent on individual enterprises and personal contacts, mainstream publishers started to become aware of the significant literary merit and potential commercial value of translated Arabic fiction. This realization resulted in a new struggle in the field in the form of competition over securing publishing rights of Arabic fiction works, needless to say, especially that of Mahfouz himself. The Award seems to have (re)ignited the interest of many university presses in this developing intellectual field. Perceiving it as a field worthy of investment, new niche publishers competed for a share in the field and began promoting and translating Arabic fiction in the Anglo-American world.

Prior to winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988, a limited number of Mahfouz's fictional works were translated into English. Outside the Arab world, he was only known to specialists in Arabic literature (Altoma, 1990), who later were instrumental in helping Mahfouz reach a wide international recognition. Mahfouz himself testifies to this fact by admitting that it was "through these translations that publishers became acquainted with my works, translating them to other languages. I am certain they were among the most important factors contributing to my being awarded the Nobel Prize" (Rakha, 2002).

When Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize, "silence fell and many wondered" who he was (Mahfouz, 1988). However, after the award, the translations of his literary works, that had laid for so long at the periphery of the field of world literature leaped to the centre as they enjoyed a sudden broad international appeal. The position of translated Arabic fiction experienced a sudden upturn due to the unprecedented public as well as institutional demand. This in turn led many publishers to invest time and effort to secure the translation rights and publish the works of many Arabic fiction writers, particularly those of Mahfouz.

It was in 1985 that the AUCP signed an exclusive foreign rights agreement with Mahfouz "in exchange for nothing" (Johnson-Davies, 2007). Following Mahfouz's award of the Nobel Prize in 1988, and in catering for the increasing demand for translation, and by means of cutting translation costs, the AUCP was fast to forge a partnership with Doubleday, to whom AUCP sold the English translation rights of fifteen of Mahfouz's works. The niche publishers who ventured into the market, in the UK and the US, and who have earlier grappled to keep a limited repertoire of translated fictional works in print, were made to "battle against the giant, faceless controllers of corporate publishing, who "discovered" Mahfouz [in particular, and Arabic fiction in general] after the Nobel Prize and insisted upon their exclusive rights to his works" (Burness, 1992, p. 100). The emergence of a new form of capital, i.e., symbolic capital, subjected the field to a new phase of struggle between the agents over this new capital after the Nobel Prize. In other words, translators and publishers competing over the translation of Mahfouz's works were in Bourdieu's terms competing over the symbolic capital attached to his name as a Nobel Prize Laureate. This, in turn, would have its implications on the field in terms of the economic capital that could be realized.

This phase constituted, as Allen (2003, p. 3) puts it "some kind of heyday" in the publication of modern Arabic literature in general and Arabic fiction in particular. In the US, small publishing houses, like Interlink, as well as several university presses and programs, started to publish several series dedicated to translations of Arabic fiction. The efforts of various university presses such as UT Austin, Arkansas, Columbia, Syracuse, California, and Minnesota helped the circulation of Arabic fiction translations. They have indeed played a pivotal role in disseminating Arabic fiction in the Anglophone world by brining "Arab writers with a high reputation in their countries to international attention" (Clark, 2000, p. 12).

In the UK, several niche independent publishers emerged and began working side by side with Saqi Publications and Quartet Books in producing a significant amount of

translations featuring Arabic fiction writers from most part of the Arab world. Among those publishers are Garnet Press, Haus Arabia Books, Bloomsbury Publishing, and Swallow Books. These small publishing houses have helped the field of translating Arabic fiction maintain some degree of autonomy and consequently attain its present degree of recognition in the Anglophone world. They have also played an invaluable role in keeping the repertoire of translated Arabic fiction alive by making it accessible to the English reading audience.

In 1988, a landmark initiative was introduced with its mission being to serve as a “vehicle for intercultural dialogue and exchange” between the Arab and Anglophone worlds and to give Arabic literature “its rightful place in the canon of world literature” (Peterson, 2013). The initiative was in the form of a magazine titled *Banipal: Magazine for Modern Arabic Literature*. *Banipal* comprises translations of short stories, excerpts of novels and poems as well as other Arabic literature related material and news. It also publishes three issues a year, each of them focusing on a particular country or theme. Since its foundation, the magazine has played an effective role in expanding the audience of the various genres of the Arabic literary tradition.

Interest in Arabic literature/fiction began to fade away since from the mid-1990s until the beginning of the twenty-first century. Many publishers, especially corporate mainstream ones, started cutting back as they realised that the Anglophone reading public’s interest in Arabic fiction was nothing but a temporary phenomenon. This fact is supported by Edward Said’s (1990, p. 278) *Embargoed Literature* in which he emphasised that: “Mahfouz has more or less dropped from discussion – without having provoked even the more venturesome literati into finding out which other writers in Arabic might be worth looking into”.

6. The Post-9/11 Phase (2001 – Present)

Altoma (1996; 2000; 2005) identified three phases in the history of translating Arabic fiction into English. This paper argues for a fourth phase which could be referred to as the

‘post-9/11 phase’. Identifying this period as a new phase is justified by the fact that prior to 9/11 there was a downward trend in the volume of activity of translating Arabic fiction on the part of the publishers, and lack of interest in translated Arabic fiction on the part of readers.

Since the stimulus given to the field by awarding the Nobel Prize to Mahfouz in 1988, it was the events of 9/11 and its aftermath that re-drew the attention of the Anglo-American world to the Arab region and its literature. This period was described by Humphrey Davies as a “kind of a fecund period in Arabic literature” (Qualey, 2009). It was characterised by a significant shift in the field “reflected in everything from Arabic provision and uptake at universities to a growing interest in and consumption of Arabic cultural product” (Büchler & Guthrie, 2011, p. 18). These statements provide further justification for identifying this period as a new phase. The impact 9/11 had on the field of Arabic fiction translation into English also echoes in the statement of Davies where he stresses:

That probably is the biggest thing. It has had an effect. The Middle East is always in our screens, if not in our faces. People do want to understand more, how does that part of the world tick? One would like, as any intelligent person, to know what people are thinking. When you learn it through literature, you sometimes get a much more intimate, a way more real sense of what the person’s world is like (Qualey, 2009).

This phase witnessed an increase in the number of universities both in the UK and the US offering a variety of courses under the general umbrella of ‘Arabic literature in translation’. In the UK, the British Council and the British Centre of Literary Translation strove to bring Arabic literature/fiction closer to the UK reading public through translation. Büchler and Guthrie (2011, p. 18) state that:

Arts Council England funded translations from Arabic as part of their provision for publishers, and a UK publishing delegation visited the Cairo Book Fair in anticipation of the Arab

World being the market focus at the London Book Fair and the UK being the guest of honour at the Cairo Book Fair. In 2009 the two organisations jointly ran a landmark Arabic-English literary translation workshop in Cairo and supported Beirut 39, a project of the Hay Telegraph Festival which selected 39 Arab authors under the age of 39 whose work was translated in a Bloomsbury anthology of the same name. Latest initiatives by the British Centre for Literary Translation have introduced Arabic in its Summer School for translators and in its mentorship scheme started in 2010.

In the US, “Arabic [became] a major government priority, and so there [was] a pressure to produce students to work in the government” (Halim, 2006). Many state funded initiatives started to emerge as well with the aim of ‘bridging the gap’ between the Arab world and America. Significant among these initiatives are the Teachers of Critical Languages Program (TCLP) and Youth Exchange and Study program (YES), both funded by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) of the American Department of State. Correspondingly, some American organisations started to initiate similar initiatives, such as the Fulbright Commission’s Foreign Languages Teaching Assistants program (FLTA). One can conjecture the relation between these initiatives and the ‘National Defence and Education Act’ of 1958 for both of their missions were/are to produce “specific defence oriented personnel”. However, contextually, this “growing interest has naturally necessitated the availability of Arabic literary works in English” (Aldebyan, 2008, p. 86). That is, despite the fact that this interest was described by Sinan Antoon as being a “forensic interest. For the most part it’s bad, because it’s assumed that novels and poems are going to explain September 11 to you” (Qualey, 2010). These governmental initiatives illustrate the influence of the field of power on the field of translation in general and on the field of translating Arabic fiction in particular. This is a manifestation of the external factors’ influence on the dynamics of the field of translation.

Other geo-political and socio-cultural events, e.g., the Arab Spring, have sparked a new surge of interest in the Arab world and its literature/fiction. Kitto (1968, p. 8) contends, “[t]hat which distils, preserves and then enlarges the experience of people is Literature”. In order to understand the motives behind the Arab Spring, the Anglophone reading public turned to translated Arabic literature in search for information. These mainly politically-driven mini-spikes have contributed in giving a boost to translated Arabic fiction and continue to have an effect on the field both internally and externally.

7. Concluding Remarks

The aim of this paper was to investigate the genesis of Arabic fiction translation into English. Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological concepts of *field* and *capital* offered us the opportunity to perceive this cultural product as a “socially regulated activity” (Hermans, 1997, p. 10). It also enabled us to understand the internal and external factors that informed and conditioned the formation of this intellectual field.

By drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of *field* it was possible to situate the English translations of Arabic fiction within their historical, political, and socio-cultural contexts. And by drawing on his concept of *capital* it was possible to understand the dynamics of the field, which is the outcome of the struggle between the various agents over the capital available in the field.

The first of the two main findings of this paper is that it was possible to accurately trace the first translation of Arabic fiction into English back to 1908. Although Altoma (2005) mentioned that prior to 1947 there were very few translations of Arabic fiction, he was not able to provide a specific date. This means that we can now set the initial phase as being between 1908 and 1967, contrary to the earlier perceived date of 1947-1967.

The second finding is the identification of a fourth phase which is referred to as ‘post 9/11 phase’. The paper provided the rationale for identifying it as such, highlighted its characteristics, and explained its dynamics.

During this phase the field of translating Arabic fiction into English was mainly influenced by external factors (the field of power) while internal factors (translators and publishers) played a secondary role. In contrast, during the other three phases the field was mainly influenced by internal factors while external factors played a secondary role.

Using Bourdieu's sociological concepts enabled us to unveil the geo-political forces influencing the field of Arabic fiction translation into English. Since the field of fiction translation is influenced by such forces, and since these forces are ongoing, it is likely that the field will continue to evolve in response to the events.

As a result of the findings, English translations of Arabic fiction should not be perceived merely as translations, but should also be interpreted against the backdrop of the political and socio-historical conditions under which they are produced and read. Although the translation of fiction may be thought of as a literary work, the field of translation itself and the actual process of translating are informed and conditioned by factors that fall outside the realm of literary work. Furthermore, it is now possible to perceive Arabic fiction translation into English as a *field* in Bourdieu's terms.

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