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**The Biases of the Translator
The Cultural Dimension in Ahdaf Soueif's
Translation of Mourid Barghouti's I Saw Ramallah**

A Thesis Submitted by

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Dedication

**To him who taught me that what is essential is
invisible to the eye**

To Prof. Abdelwahab Elmessiri

My Godfather and my Mentor

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Introduction

Introduction

Biases control almost every aspect in life: language, religion, politics, habits and traditions, and even means of entertainment. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary and The New Webster's Dictionary^{*}, 'bias' is an opinion or a feeling favouring one side of an argument or an item in a group; it is a one-sided inclination of the mind. 'Bias' is synonymous with 'partiality', 'subjectivity' and 'prejudice'. 'Partiality' is a fondness or a bias in favour of one side, whereas 'subjectivity' is seeing something from the viewpoint of the thinking subject conditioned by its personal characteristics. The term 'prejudice' however carries a negative connotation as it refers to any preconceived opinion; it represents a kind of unjustifiable and unreasonable bias (New Webster's). Generally, in English, bias is often regarded as an unfavourable attitude.

In the Arabic culture, the corresponding term for 'bias' is 'taḥayyuz' which is derived from the root words 'ḥawz' and 'ḥayyiz'. Al-Mu'jam-ul-Waseet^{*} defines 'ḥawz' as driving or urging someone to do something, or agreeing to go along with a certain principle or group, whereas 'ḥayyiz' refers to the occupation of a certain space. In this sense, the Arabic term 'taḥayyuz' is the alteration of one's attitude to turn against or to be on the same line with something or someone. In the Qur'anic context, the adjective 'mutaḥayyiz' means leaving one's own space or battle to another side as in Surat Al-Anfal, verse 16: "ومن يولهم"

^{*} Hereinafter referred to as Oxford and New Webster's.

^{*} Hereinafter referred to as Al-Mu'jam.

يومئذ دبره إلا متحرفاً لقتال أو متحيزاً إلى فئة فقد باء بغضب من الله ومأواه جهنم وبئس المصير" (If any do turn his back to them on such a day- unless it be in a stratagem of war, or to retreat to a troop of his own- he draws on himself the wrath of God and his abode is Hell- an evil refuge indeed). In his translation of the meanings of the Qur'an, Abdullah Yusuf Ali asserts that when the believers meet a hostile army, there is no room for escaping; martyrdom or victory should be the motto for every soldier. The death of an individual may be a triumph for faith. Two exceptions are recognized: to go back in order to jump forward or to deceive the enemy by a feint; if an individual or a group is isolated from their force, they can fall back on their force and join the group in order to fight the battle (1: 418). In this case, bias is recommended since it aims at establishing faith and truth.

In its cultural context, the term 'bias' involves siding with or against a set of beliefs and principles while employing different cultural tools to propagate for/against them either consciously or unconsciously. Bias not only penetrates various individual practices but also finds its way into human sciences; namely, physical and social sciences. Even architecture does not escape biased applications; the same goes to medicine, engineering, psychiatry, music, painting, mass media, education, fashion and furniture. Biases take different forms, but one of the most significant of all is language. When language, the means of communication and interaction, turns into a tool for manipulation and a setting for semantic games, it can distort some clear established facts. In the preface to his book The World from a Western Perspective, Abdelwahab Elmessiri states that every society has its biases, but what happens is that many people around the world have started abandoning the biases that stem from their historical, human and existential reality, and have started adopting Western biases, and viewing themselves

through Western eyes. Giving up one's own individuality and seeing oneself through the eyes of the *other* means wiping out the human identity gradually yet viciously, especially if this *other* is the outcome of a utilitarian materialistic value-free culture.

The present study thus aims at addressing the issue of bias and its relation to translation, the nature of linguistic meaning and the relationship between the signifier and the signified. It also attempts to study some of the factors that control the translation of literary works and their reception by different audiences. The reading and reception of a text depend largely on an individual basis; i.e. the reader's age, sex, class, education, psychological status and cultural orientations. Hans Robert Jauss believes that a literary work is more like "an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence" (206). Hence, the reader plays a vital role in generating the meaning of the text and adding to its interpretation.

In this sense, the idea of bias is closely related to literature since the interpretation of a literary work is not universal. The hermeneutic approach refutes any objective reading of a text. The text does not consist of separate words that carry ever fixed meanings to its receptors; the interpretation of a text is always connected to the relationship between the signifier and the signified in a given culture, and the receptors' status and background. Hans George Gadamer believes that "prejudice" does not necessarily connote a negative implication, since the sensitivity required to understand a text hermeneutically involves neither neutrality nor the suppression of one's self, but rather the conscious recognition of one's own prejudices (Truth 271). This idea will be examined with

special reference to the English translation of Mourid Barghouthi's prose narrative Ra'ytu Ramallah.

Besides portraying moments of Barghouthi's life during his seventeen-year exile from Cairo and thirty-year deportation from Palestine and alluding to the reasons of such deportation and exile, this autobiographical book clearly highlights the feeling of displacement and the paradoxical sense of belonging and not-belonging that overwhelm almost every aspect of his life: his family life, his homeland and even his memory. The patching of two different worlds and times is not always absolutely successful for there may be times when hidden gaps resurface. Barghouthi's memoir shows how the sense of displacement has become the dilemma of a whole generation who was forced to leave their homeland. It does not only portray a journey of homecoming; the book rather displays a memoir of a protracted journey of displacement, misplacement and alienation.

The present thesis falls into an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The **Introduction** introduces the theoretical background of the research and presents a lexical definition of bias. **Chapter One** discusses the theoretical framework of the research and highlights the main elements controlling the interpretation and translation of literary works through touching upon the hermeneutic thought. It also explores the nature of the linguistic meaning of a word, and the problematic of bias and its impact on the interpretation and understanding of different kinds of discourse. **Chapter Two** shows the relationship between the author, who is originally a poet, and his memoir Ra'ytu Ramallah, and the horizons of expectation it offers the reader through attempting a critical interpretation of the book. **Chapter Three** is concerned with Ahdaf Soueif's English translation of the aforementioned book I Saw Ramallah

(ISR). Besides being bilingual and bicultural, Soueif is a critic and an exegete who uses her common sense in weighing one option against another in translation according to her cultural orientations, and her awareness of the biases of the author of the original text. The **Conclusion** will discuss the results found.

Chapter One

Horizons of Bias

Chapter One

Horizons of Bias

Translation is generally understood as transferring verbal messages in one language into similar verbal messages in another language. However, this is not the only form of translation; it is rarely stressed that the process of translation plays a major role in the communication and interaction between the members of the same speech-community. According to George Steiner, any model of communication is at the same time a model of translation; when dealing with each other, people use various verbal and non verbal voices, facial expressions and body signs to express different messages. Human beings perform an internal act of translation, in the full sense of the word, when receiving any message from other sources, “time, distance, disparities in outlook or assumed reference, make this act more or less difficult” (48). Even people who speak the same language need to understand the ideas and perceive the significance intended by each other. Understanding and interpretation, therefore, involve a kind of translation that facilitates communication and interaction.

Communication, therefore, is not confined to messages transmitted through verbal discourse. Language is one among “a multitude of graphic, acoustic, olfactory, tactile, symbolic mechanisms of communication” (Steiner 436). Communication embraces other kinds of audio and visual discourse which directly affect the receptor of the message either in a positive or a negative way. Translation is thus involved in receiving and understanding any kind of discourse, be it verbal or visual with their different branches; the life of the individual then depends on an accurate reading of a web of sent and received signs.

Hence, a translated text is not perceived as a replica of the original text, but rather as a parallel text with its own intrinsic beauty. Translation is mainly concerned with conveying meaning clearly and accurately, and producing an effect on its target audience as powerful as that which the original text had on its original audience. In so doing, the translator faces many impediments; in order to overcome them, changes have to be made to bridge any lexical or cultural gap between the two languages. Specific structures, imagery and cultural features in the source language (SL) must be considered when rendered into the target language (TL), so that meaning and style flow as smoothly as they do in the original language. In this sense, translation is not merely an act of imitation but rather a continuing process of re-creation of meaning.

The present chapter thus aims at exploring the nature of linguistic meaning and the relationship between the signifier and the signified while leafing through the factors which control the reader's reception of a work of art. It also seeks to study the effect of the hermeneutic motion on understanding and interpretation and the inevitable entailment of bias in translation. The transfer of bias through cultural discourse, whether verbal or non-verbal, will be studied through the study of bias in the non-verbal translation¹ of some concepts and bias in the verbal translation of certain terms. The chapter concludes by showing the means to overcome bias in translation.

In this context, the word "meaning" may seem problematic. Words, in any utterance, acquire meaning through their relation to other accompanying words in a sentence, and a sentence carries its meaning according to context. Likewise, a text does not stand in isolation from its wider context; i.e. the real world and other texts. Apart from the old tradition which states that an orthographic word has one fixed meaning,

words acquire significance through the context in which they occur, and generate various meanings within a certain context of culture. Mona Baker stresses that “the lexical meaning of a word or lexical unit may be thought of as the specific value it has in a particular linguistic system and the ‘personality’ it acquires through usage within that system” (12); whereas Walter Benjamin proposes that the language of a translation must give voice to “the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intention*” (21). Significance is thus never fixed; it is the product of an ongoing process of generation and regeneration of meaning.

In this sense, linguistic meaning is not always fixed. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, any linguistic sign is made up of a signifier (the written or spoken signal) and a signified (the object or concept referred to) and the relationship between them is more or less arbitrary or unmotivated (67-9). Elmessiri gives a different definition to the signifier and the signified. For him, the signifier denotes the "sensible" part of the word (the spoken or visual sign) whereas the signified is the "intelligible" part of the meaning (Al-Logha wal-Magaz 219), and the relationship between them is complex; it is a relationship of "attachment and detachment". There is a distance that separates between the signifier and the signified but at the same time they are connected through a final point of reference (Language 130); in other words, there is a distance between the signifier "love" and the concept signified. It is not clear whether it means spiritual love, physical love or love of knowledge for instance; yet, the final point of reference between the signifier and the signified is that "love" is a feeling or an affection of some kind. The same idea is expressed by Peter Newmark who believes that “whilst the meaning of a completely context-determined word may appear to be remote from its

non-contextual (core) meaning, there must be some link between the two meanings” (17). Hence, the signifier is not always clearly defined; a word may have more than one denotative meaning, each of which may carry different associations and implications. Similarly, the signified is far from being fixed as it does not only differ according to the text or the situation, but also the concepts of one language may radically differ from those of another. Jonathan Culler stresses that each language organizes the world differently, and that “languages do not simply name existing categories; they articulate their own” (31). All such connotations and implications may therefore be determined through considering the wider context of the word; i.e. the text and its cultural context.

In some cases, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is clearly defined and fixed because the gap between them is narrow. According to Elmessiri, this usually occurs in the case of the signifiers which refer to concrete objects like machines, since the semantic field of the signified is not extensive; the same goes for terms of natural sciences (Al-Logha wal-Magaz 196). For instance, the semantic field of the signifier “bed” is limited; yet, it may extend to include luxurious beds, beds made of straw used by poor people, or even beds in the prison. The signified of a certain signifier changes according to context; i.e. the same word elicits different reactions according to the viewpoint of the interlocutor and the receptor, and the feelings it evokes in them. This is because the relationship between the signifier and the signified, as stated by Elmessiri, passes through human time and place. There is a long distance between dreams and whims, and between thoughts and interests that separate the signifier and the signified (Al-Logha wal-Magaz 194). Moreover, the relationship between the linguistic structure of the signifier, and the social and the historical structure of the