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AS CELEBRITY AUTHOR AND THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATING ARABIC:
GIRLS OF RIYADH GO ON THE ROAD

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ABSTRACT

This essay considers the recent production of texts in English that construct and rely on repeated and homogenized images of Muslim women, focusing on a translated text but arguing for its contextualization within the market of popular memoir. Taking the translation of Rajaa Alsanea’s *Banat al-Riyadh* into English as a case study, I argue that revisions made by press and author to my translation assimilated it to chick-lit generic conventions in the anglophone marketplace, muting the gender politics and situatedness of multiple kinds of Arabic that acted, in the original novel, as a critique of the Saudi system. Paratextual framing of the marketed book and translational choices emphasized the fiction as a writing of “experience,” bringing it closer to the memoir genre and linking it to a tradition of what I call Orientalist ethnographicism. These effects produce a work and author-figure both exotic and familiar.

When Rajaa Alsanea’s *Girls of Riyadh* appeared on display at Borders and Barnes and Noble in July 2007, its title page listed me as co-translator with the author of the Arabic original. In her Acknowledgments, Alsanea thanked several friends and her siblings for making sure that nothing was “lost in translation” (n.p.). A press profile suggested that I had played a minor role: “Alsanea received help translating the novel from Arabic into English from Marilyn Booth.... ‘My English is not perfect,’ said Alsanea, who in conversation expresses herself ar-
ticulately and with no trace of accent” (Wisby 2007, 2).

Between the presence of my name on the title page, its absence in the Acknowledgments, and Alsanea’s invocation of me as a desultory editor of her English lies a story of text circulation and commodification that, I argue, is best understood when one considers the apparatus of publicity and public image-making along with the less visible process of actually producing the text of a translation. The marketing of an authorial persona frames the text’s reception by readers and—as with memoiristic texts written in English by female immigrants and refugees from Muslim-majority societies—secures a commodified image, the transnational-translated figure of the Muslim female writer as cosmopolitan authority in the anglophone-dominated global cultural marketplace. *Girls of Riyadh* exemplifies this process as an avowedly fictional work lauded (like much Arabic literature in translation) as providing sociological insight into the lives of young people in Saudi Arabia today—a truth effect, a notion of experience as transparently rendered through a text, that the author’s media appearances do not dispel and that the final, published translation buttresses.

One might shrug off the observations that the English text Penguin published differs in thoroughly consistent ways from the translation I submitted to the press as sole translator, and that my role in the English text’s production was rejected by author and publisher and has been minimized by the author’s public statements, as simply another indication of the generally dismal status of the literary translator in the cultural economy of Western modernity. Yet, I argue, these displacements are specifically significant to the marketing of Islam as a sign of difference in the North American cultural-political arena through highly gendered images—a rewriting that produces (and is authorized by) an authenticity effect that turns fiction into memoir and acts as a pedagogy of the familiar-exotic.

Before turning to *Girls of Riyadh* specifically, I introduce the anglophone market for works by female authors from Muslim-majority societies. Clothing familiarly exotic tropes in new dust jackets, the production and marketing of both fiction in translation such as *Girls of Riyadh* and memoirs draw on a long history of producing the Orientalized Other, specifically of what I call Orientalist ethnographicism, and equally on recent developments in the transnational anglophone popular book trade.
By “Orientalist ethnographicism,” I mean a way of seeing and writing the Other that grounds authority in a written narrative of personal experience, “capturing” a society through the I/eye; and furthermore, claiming the authority of graphing the text in a global (and globalizing) language of reception, which is today predominantly English. That is, not only the translated book but also the figure of the author circulates as a cosmopolitan commodity conversant in the global language of the literary marketplace. Like the tsunami of new books that seek to elucidate varieties of Islam and shape Middle East–centered policy for readers in the global North, memoirs help to shape the context for European and American consumption of fictional literature from the region; the popularity of memoir is one (though not the only) factor in establishing not only what gets translated but also how texts are translated.

Memoir and popular fiction from the Middle East, circulating in English, respond to (and likely stimulate) heightened public interest among Western publics in all things “Islamic.” They offer up a particular kind of individuality-in-celebrity that, as it resists and challenges certain stereotypes (by, for example, showing these authors as media-savvy and articulate transnational figures), may sustain others. How do Alsanea’s public self-presentation through press interviews and her image as produced through reviews of her book, as well as her public narrative of the translation process and the published translation itself, accomplish this? I link this mediated image of the Muslim female author-celebrity to translation processes and a politics of translation that—privileging Alsanea’s image as a global writer—shape her writing of me as translator out of the text. That she has been able to dismiss my reading of the text and replace it with hers challenges a frequently-adduced theme in postcolonial translation studies: the notion that the “first-world translator” might have the power to shape the “third-world text.”

A more realistic notion of power dynamics in the “world literature” translation marketplace would take account of actual processes of translation as negotiations (including, as in this case, the assertion of a non-negotiable authorial status) made possible by the particular nature of the publishing field, which relies on market forces while at the same time minimizing them within the texts that are produced as well as through paratextual apparatuses that market these texts. Such a notion would accord due respect to the author who has acceded to a status
that allows her significant control over the proliferation of new texts in other languages based on her Arabic text, while also exploring the potential impact on readers of undoing the translator’s interpretation of that text. It is not just a question of authorial status, of course; one must ask as well what roles publishing houses and editors play. In some cases, publisher and author may have converging agendas that dominate the particular shape of the final product, in this case the translated text. In other cases, translator’s and publisher’s interests may converge, or the author may support the translator’s vision of the new text against an editor who might prefer to see a “smoother” text emerge. But an author who has demonstrated high market value and/or achieved transnational renown through winning a prestigious prize or in other ways is likely to be able to exert more control over the final product.

In complicated ways, market forces permeate the fabric of the new work that emerges from the translation process. As we know from decades of critical work on culture industries around the world, no published text is solely an act of disinterested aesthetic creation, impervious to material forces of book production and marketing. But literary translation is a particularly troublesome arena for competing pressures on the text, and the issues range far beyond that of the extent to which a translation may be said to represent the original, and precisely how it does so. There are issues of ownership, issues of the material bases of culture production. Also at issue is the translator’s status as a piece-work wage laborer whose access to the text is barred in the process of creating a particular kind of public image. In this process of creating a representation, who owns the text?

These are not easy issues; there is no “right answer” here. However, given the dominance of gender-saturated imagery in competing productions of Islam as a rather static set of images in today’s global informational marketplace, it is important to ask how translational processes produce, contribute to, or undermine dominant images (in a certain venue, at a certain moment) of that homogenized figure, the Muslim Woman; to ask who controls these processes and what the effects might be. These questions are part of an ongoing conversation about the status of contemporary Arabic letters in translation, one that was perhaps publicly initiated by Edward Said’s famous essay, “Embargoed Literature,” which appeared in *The Nation* in 1990. As the language of *Banat*
al-Riyadh is domesticated into its new anglophone home, i.e. Girls of Riyadh, through erasure of many cultural and linguistic specificities, both the story in the text and the story of the text’s controversial appearance in Arabic become more easily digested as ethnographic accounts where “difference” is easily assimilable to North American cultural and linguistic norms, and all of this is buttressed by the image of the author in the literary marketplace. This has the effect of depoliticizing the narrative, taming the differences within, and—as a corollary of the author’s status as authentic ethnographic subject—sidelining and discrediting the translator’s role in producing the text. Whatever the author’s own intention in rewriting the translation and dismissing the translator’s role might have been, this produces a particular effect: it foregrounds the image of the authentic-but-cosmopolitan Muslim Woman whom the publisher and anglophone audience appear to desire. This is an image of someone who is comfortable with English, able to write her own English text. Not only does this figure of the writer-heroine efface processes and effects of translation—and the status of literature and the author as globalized commodities—but it also silences questions about gender privilege and perhaps even Saudi national politics which do arise in the Arabic text.

WHEN IS FICTION A FICTION?

Effacing the translator—dismissing her reading of the text—twines together several strong strands of contemporary “global” culture production, both generally and specifically concerning Arabic literature in English translation. There is the history of the marginal and muted status of the translator in capitalist societies, buttressed by a prevalent ideology of individualism that upholds Romantic ideals of the author as lone genius. A history too complex to narrate here, this yields a notion of translation as mechanical reproduction and the translator’s role as ideally one of graceful self-effacement: a notion itself globalized despite translators having held different statuses in other times and places including Europe at earlier moments. Alsanea’s “nothing lost in translation” suggests such a view of unproblematic equivalence between languages, one that translation theorists and practitioners operating out of poststructuralist and postcolonialist assumptions have long declared
impossible and undesirable. Yet these long-established concepts of the translator’s role, shaped by humanist notions of authorship as privileged individuality, are not only hard to dispel, but are useful to the marketplace. They operate in tandem with the equally persistent view that literature (or some literatures) can act as a transparent siting of “the real” within the very real world of Frankfurt- and New York-driven mass publishing.

In the marketplace of world literature, nowhere is this reality effect more evident than in the arena of translated Arabic literature, and it seems particularly so for works by female authors. Perhaps a tendency among readers (female and male) to conflate female authors and their female fictional protagonists, an identificatory move that scholars have traced for various times and places, is one reason. If readers in Europe and North America are more able now than in the past to separate “author” from “protagonist,” is this perhaps less the case when they consume texts from Other places? And the desire to “see into” a culture is perhaps best satiated by works attached to female authorial names, offering the promise to carry the reader into the hidden domestic heart of the society. More specifically, given the alleged transparency of translation (that is, the notion that a translated text can simply reproduce all facets and effects of its source text) and the inclination to consider works of what used to be called “third-world literature” as windows on the world, native informant texts for an informationally eager Western readership operate with particular political force in this historical moment when genuine public concern in Europe and North America to “understand Islam,” as well as targeted political agendas, have generated a frenzied post–9/11 information marketplace.

The anglophone book market for translated Arabic literature is highly segmented. This is true for other literatures in English translation too, but Arabic literature is the most recent linguistically defined literary tradition to enter this market in more than an occasional way, and thus the bifurcated publication scene for literary translation seems especially marked for Arabic literature. Increasingly, independent or semi-independent literary presses have taken up a few eminent arabophone authors; mostly academic presses and a half-handful of small independent houses have published Arabic literary fiction and poetry in translation with steady dedication and little remuneration. Generally
tenuous, the financial situation of all of these publishers (and hence their ability to commission new translations) is ever more perilous in today’s crisis-ridden global economy. These small and academic presses are not where the money and the publicity machines are. The commercial market composed of large multinational conglomerate media outlets—with distributional and reviewing clout that small presses do not have—does not give much evidence of strong interest in literary fiction translated from Arabic, but such outlets have eagerly sought English-language memoirs by “ex-terrorists” (usually male) and women, whether from the Middle East or identified as European or American Muslims. Examples are numerous, ranging from Reading Lolita in Tehran (2003) by Iranian academic Azar Nafisi to Malika Oufkir’s Stolen Lives: Twenty Years in a Desert Jail (1999), to Asra Q. Nomani’s Standing Alone in Mecca: An American Woman’s Struggle for the Soul of Islam (2005), published by Random House, Talk Miramax Books, and HarperSanFrancisco respectively. What little the mega-publishers have accepted from the realms of translated Arabic fiction has been strongly subject to the search for commercially successful works and to popular political pressures to produce information about certain identity categories often conflated in public discourse: Arabs, Muslims, Middle Easterners. Aesthetic grounds have rarely been the basis for choosing texts for publication; rather, domestic political concerns and economic interests have been paramount in this particular literary marketplace.

Recently, demand for translations has closely followed the market dominance of books by US foreign policy pundits on “Islam” and Middle East–US politics, juxtaposed with the terminology of the “war on terror.” (In recent years, more than one publisher has asked me, “Haven’t you got any novels from Iraq we can publish?” And, as a publisher of translated Arabic fiction recently remarked, Iraq and Saudi Arabia are at the top of publishers’ desiderata lists, but hardly for literary reasons.) While this engages a genuine and laudable desire among North Americans to learn more about societies of West Asia and North Africa, it also arises from a reluctance to “read” those societies on terms inhabited by the local intelligentsias. Such a “reading” might prove too difficult, too haunting; it might not sell books in the North American market. Nor would it necessarily answer to or confirm audience expectations or parallel the imaginary worlds of Western-provenance writers as they have revived
cloak-and-dagger formulae in “Islamic” form, albeit with the purported aim, sometimes, of “understanding the Other.”

I am not suggesting that Arab, Turkish, and Iranian writers are deliberately writing to be translated, although no doubt a few are; I believe that most writers take seriously their local and regional audiences, not to mention their distinctive literary voices, forged in the long histories of Arabic, Turkish, and Farsi. But acts of writing, publishing, and of course translation are also embedded in globalizing commercial and cultural networks. Once a text crosses over oceans and seas and becomes available for translation and marketing, it is subject to the mutually reinforcing constraints of capitalist book marketing and audience expectations shaped by political discourse and an Orientalist ethnographicism, which, as noted above, I am using to signify both the highlighting of autobiographical “truth” (even when the work is called a fiction) as grounds for processing a literary work as an informational text about one or more Middle Eastern societies, and the highlighting of English (and other European languages) and the de-emphasis on translation in both the work itself and as the medium through which the author connects paratextually with her audiences.

A recent phenomenon is the Middle East–provenance popular best seller. Such works marry the hunger for information—a window on the mysterious Orient—to illusions of authenticity, pressures of political urgency, and the sweetness of commercial success. Some are memoirs, some are novels; but I would argue that in marketing and consumption, these genres merge into an “Islamic-world crossover genre” where fiction and memoir are homogenized or at least blurred (in acts of consumption if not production) to an unusual degree, and where the mining of information makes little distinction between the two. Enhancing this effect is the fact that best-seller novels from the region eschew the myriad experimental and thematically and stylistically complex writing practices of many novelists in the Arab world today in favor of a plot-driven, chronologically straightforward realism that is the hallmark of popular fiction (as opposed to “literary fiction”) in Euro/American languages as well. Such a preference may also arise from and feed into publishers’ emphasis since the mid-1990s on the youth market, a “neophilia” that stresses simplicity and immediacy in the literary text as it “blur[s] the line between literary creation and advertising” (Bourdieu 2008, 144) and
yields new global-English texts aimed at a youthful readership.

How do the political field and publishers’ interests shape the translator’s decision-making? If translation is art, it is also politics. Especially now, the translation of Arabic literature is fraught: the politics of it are inescapable. As a translator, one can never avoid the question of what images one is perpetuating or (hopefully) complicating, in a public culture demanding to understand—and manage—the Middle Eastern Other. There are always extra-literary dimensions. Publishers want (and believe audiences want) a sociology effect from the Arab novel. Because relatively little (though increasingly more) Arabic literature is available in English translation, especially from commercial presses with marketing clout, every choice to translate something—and every choice of how to translate it—is politically loaded.

The contemporary Saudi novel, especially with a female authorial signature fixed to it, is a case in point. Publishers are keen to get their hands on Saudi writing: if there is a single society that contemporary US readers see as encapsulating the mystery of the “Islamic Orient,” it is Saudi Arabia. Within that mystery, the mystery of mysteries remains the Arab Muslim woman, often homogenized and made to stand in for an entire society and history. A work purporting to tell the first-world anglophone reader about the Middle East and Islam from the perspective and through the voice of that most mysterious and hyper-representative inhabitant and symbol of that world, a text authored by a Saudi woman, gets to the veiled heart of Western fascinations. It is by now almost a cliché to note that the most intensely saturated stereotypical space of discourse when it comes to images of Arabs or of Islam is the space of gender. Not for the first time, the familiar nationalist trope of “woman” as the repository of tradition and yet simultaneously as the primary imagery of “the modern” acts as a globalized symbol of everything that is supposedly wrong with the Arab/Islamic/Middle Eastern Other and of everything that needs to be made right.

NORTH AMERICAN FACES OF “MUSLIM CULTURE(S)"

Popular interest among Western audiences in “Muslim womanhood” offers Arab women authors, as well as authors from non-Arab but Muslim-majority societies, an opportunity to represent themselves, to
interrupt and disturb persistent stereotypes, and to garner much broader
attention for literary works, some of which are already widely respected
in the societies where they first emerged. Unfortunately, all too often
the breadth and depth of literary contributions by these authors in their
languages of expression are lost in translation (or more accurately, in
the process of publishing) to a narrow selection of genres and themes
considered to have wide market potential by profit-seeking publishing
houses (as opposed to university or small independent presses, though
these are not hard-and-fast distinctions). A further unfortunate result of
this highly selective attention to the Arabic literary world is an Oriental-
izing celebrity-making that finds identifiably Muslim females, especially
youngish ones, particularly appealing. The veiled female face, often of
the author though not always, has become a familiar visual trope ad-
vertising books in English (whether translated or not) on and from the
Middle East, whether on the dust jacket or in interviews, reviews, and
advertisements. 9

Thus, the politics of translation and publishing is complicated by
the play of gender in an effective history—history as it works in and
through the present, history “that can be apprehended through its ef-
fects.”10 I mean a history of Orientalism that continues to shape if not
wholly define the reception of Arabic-provenant texts in the United
States. In tandem with the “war on terror” and US adventurism in
Iraq and elsewhere, production of “Arab” and “Muslim” subjectivities
through “self-authored” texts in the US marketplace is strongly shaped
by the centrality of issues of gender to Euro/American perceptions of the
region, as seen in some specific market successes.

In the wake of Iranian expatriate Azar Nafisi’s phenomenally suc-
cessful memoir, Reading Lolita in Tehran, which reads recent Iranian
history through the lens of Western humanist discourse as concentrated
in a modern literary canon and homogenizes Iranian society through
a performance of “enlightened” separation from it, a spate of memoirs
by Arab and/or Iranian and/or Muslim women appeared on North
American bookstore shelves, as I noted above.11 These works borrow
tropes from an older tradition of European travel literature, reversing
(but also preserving) the gaze at the Other by offering an aspect onto
“home” societies that often distinguishes the narrators’ now “enlight-
ened” understanding from those societies as a product of their intellec-
tual and physical journeys Westward. As Negar Mottahedeh (2004) has remarked, such memoirs become implicated in realpolitik justifications for interventions in the region: women’s kinds of embodiments are seen, not for the first time, as indicators of degrees of freedom (defined by commentators in the West) in their own societies. Or, as Hamid Dabashi says, these memoirs (he singles out Nafisi’s) help to secure and shape a “selective memory” whose twin is a “collective amnesia” about the recent history of US global reach:

[This] increasing body of mémoire by people from an Islamic background that has over the last half a decade, ever since the commencement of its “War on Terrorism,” flooded the US market... ordinarily points to legitimate concerns about the plight of Muslim women in the Islamic world and yet put[s] that predicament squarely at the service of the US ideological psy-op [among the American public]. (Dabashi 2006)

It is not entirely new, either, to find the authoritative and intriguing Muslim female commentator who the reader thinks will reveal all from behind the veil. In the long history of harem representations oriented to curious Western audiences, cosmopolitan Ottoman women capitalized on eager presumptive consumers in the West. Early twentieth-century authors such as Demetra Vaka Brown, Melek Hanım, Zeyneb Hanoum, and Halide Edib (writing in European languages) knew that their authority lay in eyewitness accounts and their ability to claim insider status as Ottoman subjects, either Muslims or companions of Muslims. Savvy marketers, they knew the value of titles incorporating “harem” and “veil.”

Today’s memoir-writing counterparts are often native-born North Americans or Europeans or immigrants writing in European languages: Azar Nafisi, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Malika Oufkir, many others. Their works are differentiated in themes, language, and effects; I do not seek to analyze them here. What they have in common is that their rhetoric and surrounding marketing apparatus (including book covers) construct their audience as Western and largely non-Muslim. Their memoiristic cast plus the dominance of English in global publishing shape a reception context for fiction by “Muslim women,” given that readers keen to learn about a society may be tempted to conflate memoir and fiction
when reading works of world literature, as I noted above—a tendency that reviews of such fiction reinforce when they focus as much or more on the writer-celebrity than the work. Furthermore, as readers read fictional narrative as memoir (which is in turn regarded as unmediated truth), they may be unaware that it is translated or assume that the translation is unproblematically literal and straightforward. This is doubtless more likely when, as in Girls of Riyadh, a first-person narrator, in this case communicating via email-type texts, addresses the reader explicitly. Images and presuppositions about representation are, unsurprisingly, reiterated through reception, shaped by the industry of book production, reviewing, and advertising.¹⁴

**THE POLITICS OF PRESENTATION**

Book cover iconography of such works, as well as advertising apparatus and interviews, often produce the author-narrator as female face swathed in hijab, seeming to offer as direct and unmediated a gaze at the reader as she promises to direct at her society. Mimesis is paramount: the author *is* narrator *is* cover image.¹⁵ Furthermore, unlike the burqa, which poses a uniformity that effaces the individual but also resists the consumer’s gaze (Whitlock 2007, 45–7), the hijab as cover image highlights individuality, framing the face and offering a legible interlocutor to the Western reader. Its legibility sets it off from the face-covering niqab or the wholly enveloping burqa, indeed perhaps making the hijab by contrast almost a familiar, if not wholly comforting, Euro/American presence. As book covers and publicity material visually produce the hijab-clad Muslim woman as author and subject of her own text—along with paratextual framing of this subject through global publicity apparatuses—they create a voicing of this individual subject which explicitly or implicitly contrasts with the silenced “Muslim Woman,” a homogenized discursive category of long provenance in Euro/American Orientalist ethnographicism. The publisher’s flap copy and imagery thus privilege a politics of personality wherein the hijab encircling the author’s face (invariably young and attractive to a Western audience) creates a truth effect. The hijab stands in for both the act of exposé that the book means to offer (revealing what is “behind the veil”) and the trope of “oppressed Muslim woman” that the book is meant to represent and deplore. Read-
ers can be simultaneously titillated and reconfirmed in their sense of superiority. Contents echo cover images, a trajectory of voyaging Westward toward “light” and visibility, although, as Gillian Whitlock has remarked, some recent testimonials by Afghan women actually frustrate expectations that such a thematic trajectory might raise (Whitlock 2007, chap. 2).

Although *Girls of Riyadh* is fiction, its market potential is based partly on this recent popularity and iconography of autobiographical writing by women self-identified as Muslim, Arab, Middle Eastern, etc. Its author’s celebrity status hinges on North Americans’ and Europeans’ fascination with “unveiling” the Muslim female author who attests to feminine experience. It is significant that (as elaborated below) reviewers and interviewers dwell on Alsanea’s appearance. As Whitlock notes, “How images are used to locate and constitute audiences and readerships as ‘Western’ is important” (2007, 7). Does the hijab’s framing of an author-image as Other and Muslim construct her book’s primary audience as “Western” and “secular”? (The same author-image in a Middle East–based media context will carry a different message.) It does appear to enhance conflation of the author with the narrator as autobiographical subject. It is clear from web-based reader reviews that many readers readily identified the author with her narrator and assumed—despite Alsanea’s protestations to the contrary—that the book was composed of emails that were not fictional and that really did circulate on the web, a fiction that has remained persistent. It is also significant that in profiles of Alsanea and in blogs responding to reviews of *Girls of Riyadh*, the book itself is less a topic of discussion than a site on which to argue competing understandings about Saudi Arabia—or Muslim-majority societies in general—through a gendered lens (and to evaluate the author by decidedly non-literary criteria: “She’s hot!” says one). And the jacket’s front-flap commentary, briefly encapsulating the story in the novel, highlights the story of the novel: the controversial reception of the Arabic original in Saudi Arabia. The jacket copy begins:

*Girls of Riyadh* was released in Lebanon in Arabic in September 2005. The novel, recounting forbidden details about the private lives of four young women from Saudi Arabia’s upper classes, immediately became a sensation all over the Arab world. Hundreds of articles were written
about it, politicians and pundits debated it publicly, online chat rooms were crowded with people hotly discussing it, and it sold more than a hundred thousand copies in the first several months—not including countless black-market editions. The author, a twenty-four-year-old Saudi Arabian woman, became an overnight celebrity. (Alsanea 2007, inside front cover)

The jacket copy went on to categorize views of the novel in the Arab world, claiming that “most of the Arab public, however, understood the novel for what it is: a true representation of events that occur in a society structured around traditions that are inherited from centuries past and are impossible to follow in today’s world” (inside front cover). Only after this does the copy turn to the book’s narrative content with a bit more detail, after which we learn that the work “opens up the hidden world of the Saudi woman to the rest of us” (inside back cover).

Just below this copy (but not, in this case, on the book’s front cover) appears Alsanea’s face framed in hijab, an image that has become an iconic presence on the internet and in newspaper book-review pages. At the same time, her image may fulfill readers’ narcissistic desires to find sameness in otherness, confirming those readers’ own identities and histories. As a dental student in Chicago and an English speaker, Alsanea is both “us” and “them.” She represents “the best” of what “we” give “them”: education in science and technology, and especially in the highly technologized medical industry. (The jacket blurb notes that she is from “a family of doctors and dentists,” perhaps giving this identity even more purchase.) That Alsanea claims to have translated the text herself lends her further authority as a truly bilingual and cosmopolitan figure; so spectacularly one of “us” that she is fluent in “our” language, she leads the reader-in-translation to trust her. Her framed and framing image, including her fluent English, offers a domesticated, modernized kind of difference that makes her understandable, appealing, and unthreatening.

As is so often (and unfortunately) the case with translated literature, this novel in English has been mostly reviewed or commented on by individuals who do not read Arabic and often have scant knowledge of Arabic literary culture. This tends to yield breathless celebrations of Alsanea as a brave lone voice, and ludicrous claims that this novel has
helped to revive the (apparently moribund?) Arabic novel as a literary form (Zoepf 2007). Censorship and the repression of cultural production and exchange in the author’s home country (the story of the novel) are constant themes in reviews of the book and in profiles of the author, with emphasis on clandestine circulation, death threats, and high prices paid on the black market—though the novel’s subsequent appearance in Saudi Arabia and support for it there are also mentioned, possibly complicating readers’ images of the region (see e.g. Thomas 2007; Zoepf 2007; Kennedy 2009). Reviewers assumed oppression and repression as uniform facts of life for females across the board in Saudi Arabia, despite the privileges of the novel’s female characters and Alsanea’s own life history in a family of physicians, female and male. As a graduate of King Saud University in Riyadh, she is living proof that Saudi women can and do attend university. Yet, that Alsanea apparently breaks the mold (of readers’ or at least journalists’ expectations, if not of Saudi women’s lives) somehow seems to be the exception that proves the rule.

The book’s emergence is thus framed within a larger discourse that juxtaposes broad social and cultural constraint with gender-specific constraints (paralleling themes in the popular memoir genre mentioned above), while remaining silent on issues of local class privilege or other group-defined hierarchies. This discourse poses Alsanea’s fictional construction of young (and privileged) women’s experiences against a sociopolitical backdrop that emphasizes “Islamic conservatism” over other possible sources of local social practice, following a long Orientalist practice of privileging “Islam” as explanatory framework for all social and political phenomena. Thus, Alsanea participates in a characterization of her society that makes her—as an articulate, transnational, writing Saudi woman—exceptional, thereby fitting into typical English-language rhetoric on Middle Eastern women today that utilizes such figures as alleged “exceptions to the rule,” highlighting by contrast the supposedly uniformly “oppressed” women of Saudi and other Arab societies.

This celebration of Alsanea as a brave young woman facing forces of darkness is a leitmotif in Leslie Thomas’s (2007) *Sunday Times* profile heralding her as Saudi Arabia’s “new minister for women.” In her enthusiasm, Thomas makes the erroneous statement that Saudi women are not permitted to “have employment” and dwells on Alsanea’s appearance, calling her a “class act” in silken hijab and “expensive, loosely cut jeans,”
playing up the twin themes of oppression and exoticism. Yet, more complicated realities peek through this framing of Alsanea as a brave lone voice in the Saudi wilderness. For one thing, if Alsanea’s mother wants her to be the first female Saudi minister (as Thomas writes), then clearly Alsanea is not alone among Saudi women in advocating change, nor is her generation the first to articulate it.

Alsanea does little to dispel this media-conferred status as a near-solitary voice. Katherine Zoepf’s (2007) interview published in the New York Observer describes Alsanea as concerned about the representational burden this confers:

In such a climate [of heightened tensions between the West and the Arab world], she said, it has been disconcerting to realize that her book is one of very few novels translated from Arabic—and one of even fewer to come out of Saudi Arabia—to find a mass-market American audience. “It’s a big responsibility to be representing my country like this,” said Ms. Alsanea in a phone interview, speaking rapid, flawless English and sounding much younger than her 25 years. “Just being one of the few books that are translated feels like a huge responsibility.” (Zoepf 2007)

Such concern is valid, indeed laudable. But it also tends to mute other literary voices that have been translated from Arabic, if not as widely read as hers. Alsanea is speaking specifically of Saudi Arabia, but the interviewer frames her on a sweeping canvas of Arabic literature: “Girls of Riyadh... has been credited with helping to reinvigorate the novel as an Arabic literary form by encouraging other writers to experiment with colloquial Arabic and contemporary topics in their work” (Zoepf 2007). As if other Arab writers did not already do this! Neither Alsanea nor her interlocutor mentions any of the numerous other female authors writing in Arabic whose novels have appeared in translation. Her expression of anxiety about the responsibility of representing an entire nation tends to reify her in that role. She also upholds the reality effect—or the notion of the novel as sociological document—by advancing the assumption that her novel renders Saudi society directly. She emphasizes its real effects in the world, for example by mentioning the many emails she has received from women. “I felt it was my duty to take care of these people,” she says (Thomas 2007). To invoke the book as a reformist and persuasive text
with real effects on the society carries the notion of direct, unmediated representation further as it buttresses the author’s status as heroic lone spokesperson. One can laud Alsanea’s social concern yet wonder why she fails to mention other Saudi women and men working for social good and political change. Thus, her persona as translated for readers through print and visual media feeds into prevalent modes of framing Arabic literature for anglophone readers—as simultaneously direct, representative glimpse “behind the veil” and cultural oddity, a lone implant in a cultural desert rather than one of many works of fiction nourished on rich and deep traditions of expressive art.

The novel’s fabric contributes to this reality effect, with its structure based on serial emails, dated, that trace intertwined stories of four young, economically privileged Saudi women. These fictional emails are sent by the anonymous female narrator to subscribers around the nation. The construction of the text humorously disarms potential criticism of its very publication by bringing “interactive” critique and riposte into the novel’s fabric within the narrative framing that introduces the individual, ongoing, e-serialized stories of the quartet. In each framing email, the narrator responds to fictional interlocutors, male figures writing in who parallel the male characters. The text thus flirts with reader engagement and poses questions about authenticity and truth, as the narrator remains teasingly anonymous, the listserv address fictitious.

The “have your say” postings to Timesonline.co.uk that followed the online publication of Thomas’s (2007) profile make it clear that among commentators identifying themselves as Saudi, there was a diversity of views on whether Alsanea should have published this book and what its representational purchase might be. Some dismissed it outright; several candidly noted their initial resistance while lauding the book’s publication as an opportunity to air views. A person writing from Riyadh under a female name lends the authority of authenticity: Reema asserts the work’s close approximation to realities of young women’s lives and asks readers not to judge others before they judge themselves; a comment that could be aimed at anglophone readers and at Saudi men such as Omar from Riyadh who starts things off by criticizing Alsanea—and is a “real life” counterpart to the novel’s framing device: irritated male interlocutors whom the narrator quotes and parries.

A forthright multiplicity of opinion also characterizes those writing
in who may not be Saudi but who clearly identify as Muslims. The book’s appearance in English, like its appearance in Arabic, offered a platform for inter-Muslim (and inter-ethnic and inter-national) debates over the quality of contemporary life in Arab countries, in contrast to homogenizing and ahistorical descriptions of the novel offered by jacket and publicity copy such as that on the Amazon website: “[A]n inside peek into a hidden world.... Never-ending cultural conflicts underscore the difficulties of being an educated modern female growing up in the 21st century in a culture firmly rooted to an ancient way of life.”

Yet within the same thread, commentators who define themselves as outsiders to the cultures of the region refuse in their posts to recognize that diversity, posing their issues within a “clash-of-cultures” binary framework. Book and author become representative as well as representational in the sense of sparking discussion on those uneven and inaccurate binaries familiar from Orientalist tradition and today’s public sphere: “East” and “West,” “Muslim women” versus “Western women,” “modern” and “medieval.” In this thread, it is the author’s practices and public roles (more than the book itself) that are in play—from whether she is “proud [enough] of her culture” to whether she should wear hijab (and what hijab means in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere); from whether she is a tool of Western media to the composition of her audience; from her present life outside the home country to admiring personal comments that remind us how important visual images are (“she looks damn sexy in the hijab”). If the author’s image is a product of the work, a projection by readers shaped also by media appearances and self-promotional labor, it is the image that takes control here, overshadowing the novel.

Alsanea constructs herself as a cultural producer distanced from the marketplace, implying in more than one interview that she has not made money from her Penguin contract by saying that writers in the Arab world do not tend to make money. True enough, but perhaps not in her case. Disavowing the commercial aspect of her celebrity-author status aligns her with aesthetic and literary concerns—the high symbolic capital of literature (following Pierre Bourdieu’s formulation)—rather than with the popular fiction marketplace where the book’s usual labeling as “chick lit” would place it (Thomas 2007; Kennedy 2009). Many reviewers note the book’s affinity with anglophone chick lit, repeatedly invoking Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* (1996) as a model not only
thematically and stylistically but also structurally, for *Girls of Riyadh* shares with Bushnell’s best seller as with several others in this genre a focus on the surfaces of a quartet of intertwined lives, young female friends as privileged consumers of globalized fashion, entertainment venues, media, and loci of communication and sociability.\(^{19}\) The analogy sets up expectations dashed by the text’s tameness, to judge by the disappointed tone of some reviews. Not only does sex remain behind closed doors in the novel, but its cosmopolitan, wired young protagonists are not the exotica of Hollywood’s Arabia. “Disappointingly, the scenes are not too dissimilar to a western hen party: bitching, belly dancing and gossiping about men. The atmosphere seems far from warm and sisterly. Girls obsess about bodies…” (Thomas 2007). Disappointment stems from demands for difference that remain unsatisfied.

**FROM CHICK LIT TO CHICK CRIT?**

The critique of Saudi society found in these reviews is one that focuses on, and assumes, “difference” based on perceived and longstanding Orientalist binaries. This perspective does not consider how the novel might operate critically in national-regional contexts, as it also conflates text and author to achieve maximum purchase: celebrating the author’s brave emergence into globalized stardom and her familiar-yet-slightly-exotic professional persona, deploring social constraints that cast this emergence in relief, like the trajectories of her fictional characters. A critical perspective that considers the novel locally (a “local” that incorporates translocalities) might emphasize other features. Nor need it presume the novel as a simplistic writing of youth culture. Chick lit can be chick crit: one can read the Arabic *Banat al-Riyadh* (al-Sani‘ 2005) as a critique of patriarchal Saudi culture not simplistically as uniformly oppressive of females but rather as a system that exploits consumer culture to compensate or reward privileged youth (female and male) of the majority Sunni population for adhering to status-quo social arrangements—the marriages, shopping trips, overseas sojourns, and home amenities that mark the lives of these young women characters. Subplots of familial enticement and control, mingling and clashing linguistic registers, and intertextual play convey this richer critique, upon which space constraints do not allow me to elaborate here.
Reviewers have also suggested (with apparent disappointment) that the book avoids criticizing “Islam.” I would argue that this novel’s intertextual weave—framing the girls’ stories with Qur’an and Hadith, for example—enacts the Saudi cultural system’s deployment of religious source interpretation to maintain hegemony. This in no way contradicts the cosmopolitan Saudi elite’s consumption of global culture (Girls’ intertextual references draw equally on transnational cultural figures as facets of youth self-definition). Perhaps the former makes the latter possible: global youth culture can be consumed as long as it is restrained by (that is, framed within) acknowledged ideological, religio-nationalist limits.

However, the published translation lessens the presence and impact of this theme. Markers of cosmopolitan existence—which allow participation in Saudi elite life at home and a transnational existence elsewhere—are erased in the available English version (though not entirely). If the international literary market (perhaps especially when it comes to works of Middle Eastern provenance) fetishizes foreignness, exhibiting the foreign as exotic good, it also near-neutralizes that foreignness, homogenizing it into an anglophone pop-lit lingua franca. Domesticated, the foreignness no longer threatens or even challenges in its presence. Ironically, this erasure enacts the commodification of language that the Arabic novel *Banat al-Riyadh* explores critically.

*Banat al-Riyadh* takes up the theme of English as a cosmopolitan elite lingua franca, its relationship to vernacular Arabic shaped by class and consumption. As privileged Saudi characters in the novel consume Western-provenance luxury items and cultural commodities (music, cinema)—a consumption pattern dependent on a Saudi-Euro-US commercial relationship solidified through oil—they do so in a language that blends English and Arabic in specific patterns, not only in the use of brand names, song lyrics, and other anglo-global linguistic/market commodities, but in the use of English adjectives at particular points. In my translation, I had transliterated this Arabenglish from the Arabic to convey this language politics (however imperfectly); just to give one example, the phrase with which one character evaluates another: *sheez soo kiyirvy* (she’s so curvy) (Booth 2008, 204). The Arabenglish of *Banat al-Riyadh* is a local, classed vernacular but it draws on and works within a global communications sphere where the dominance of English arises.
from (and furthers) Anglo political and financial prevalence at the turn of the twenty-first century. These girls “obsess about bodies” as speaking subjects shaped by a body politics from elsewhere, articulated in an Other language which has become their own. As in North America, this “obsession” may distract its young adherents away from a critique of status quo politics; the rewards of consumption may compensate for other modes of social control.

If, in Banat al-Riyadh, this dance of consumption and compensation is a cleverly threaded theme conveyed through language use, intertextuality, and international brand names that erupt into the Arabic, the theme recedes in the bland translation Penguin published. And if Girls of Riyadh thematizes these issues within the text—and, in its own history of publication, marketing, and circulation, exemplifies them—these themes are not picked up by reviews of the translation in leading taste-setting venues, perhaps because they do not fit the dominant script outlined above but also perhaps because the erasure of difference in the language of the published translation mutes this commercial give-and-take by erasing the Arabenglish transactional lingo of the globalized. Alsanea says in her “Author’s Note” to the translation that she omitted elements that would not “make sense to the non-Arab reader” (2007, vii-viii)—an interesting comment, perhaps, on how remote many North Americans in particular are from transnational routings and subjectivities. But shouldn’t translations of fiction open readers to such forces, rather than shield them by silencing their thematic and formal significance within the literatures of Others?

THE TRANSLATOR’S TALE

It is often assumed among audiences both in the West and in the Arab world that we translators have a modicum of power to choose which works of Arabic literature emerge on the world market and how they are translated, and in informal settings with writers and readers we are often criticized for making bad choices of texts to translate. This does bespeak the relatively powerless position of most Arab fiction writers (excluding an internationally famous few). Yet it ignores other often more powerful players: publishers, editors, agents—and occasionally authors.

Banat al-Riyadh is rare if not alone among recent Arabic novels to
capture large regional arabophone audiences. Published in Beirut and London in 2005, it was an immediate sensation throughout the Arab world and generated anger and protest among some. Thus, for Western publishers it possesses a credibility (and profit potential) based not narrowly on marketability in Euro/American circuits but more broadly on popularity (and controversy) among its first, arabophone, readers. If a novel has been phenomenally successful in Dubai, Egypt, and Tunisia, does it not beckon to a wider readership, one that can enjoy the novel and a sense of belonging in a global audience that includes arabophone readers? Yet, moving into different reception venues, the best-seller novel is inevitably subject to editorial pressures speculating on how to guarantee similarly broad popularity (and sales) in the new host culture. In this case, both globally marketed anglophone popular youth literature, especially “chick lit,” and the Muslim feminine memoir not only created a receptive potential readership for the novel but also put contextual pressure on the very style of the translated work.

Elsewhere I have analyzed translational decisions that shape the published text of *Girls of Riyadh* according to an apparently different set of criteria than governed the translation I submitted to Penguin, arguing that this reshaping of the English text altered the politics I had read in the Arabic text. As noted above, the Arabic text juxtaposes colloquial speech, infusions of English common to the Saudi cosmopolitan elite, popular culture local and global, and residues of consumer culture to sketch a fictional world that challenges the “closed society” image of Saudi Arabia prevalent in Western media but also suggests how the Saudi system manages this challenge to maintain acquiescence. Penguin’s decision to give full control of the translation to Alsanea after I had submitted my very different translation yielded, in my opinion, a text stripped of its political valence, muted in its gender politics, and denied its quite distinct voice (Booth 2008). 20

I had set out to produce a translation honoring this generationally distinctive voice in its rich intertextual world—a voice blending hip international cyber youth language, Arabic vernaculars, more standardized “educated Arabic,” and a spoken hybrid Arabenglish—along with, as noted, song lyrics, contemporary poetry, and a globalized consumer shorthand represented in fashion brand names. What had drawn me to the novel, indeed, was its exuberant linguistic landscape that signaled
complexities of contemporary elite Saudi life while challenging the smooth surface the state presented to outside observers, resisting the notion of any static or monochrome representation of Saudi society, and mocking some pretentions of contemporary (and older) Arabic literature. The rather tame stories of four young women were less the point than was this explosive verbiage, and in particular the transcription of English into the Arabic as it might be used by Arab bourgeois women: read out loud, the transcriptions suggested phrases pronounced by an Arabic speaker comfortable but not absolutely fluent in an international English of commercial and bodily surfaces. I worried that the actual stories, touching and meaningful in a Saudi context, might sound rather flat if not conveyed in an equivalent to the Arabic novel’s exuberant, up-and-down, code-switching language. As I wrote to friends at the time, “I’m already thinking about how one could shake up the text in translation by, for instance, using Arabic script somehow side-by-side with English for the phrases originally in English.”

English eruptions in the Arabic convey characters’ partial, specific worldliness, which I did not want to lose. I conveyed this globalized vernacular by italicizing phrases in Arabenglish and spelling them phonetically, a strategy erased from Penguin’s final product as were many cultural usages, Arabic linguistic turns, and local cultural reference points that I had felt it crucial to retain. I was not party to the rationale behind these decisions, but it is hard to avoid the hypothesis that author and/or editor wanted the book to blend in with the anglophone popular fiction market which depends on familiar, at times formulaic, and certainly repetitive structures and styles to maintain its large audience in a context governed by the dual pressures of industry and entertainment (Gelder 2004).

That the translation as amended drops bilingual traces that my translation highlighted and erases many social idioms and marks of the local, largely eviscerates the text’s political critique. This is sadly in parallel to the increased use of English clichés rather than phrasing that would highlight the text’s Arabic voice; as Christina Koning (2007) put it, reviewing the English-language version for The Times, “the author, who lives in America, has preferred the airport bestseller and the self-help guide as her stylistic models.”

The revised Girls of Riyadh published by Penguin prefers an easy
accessibility and monolingual anglicized tone to a rendering that emphasizes its rootedness in cosmopolitan Arabic language and culture. It gives play to similarity (the Arab *Sex and the City*) over cultural variance, “equivalence” via smooth cliché over the more interesting bumpiness of stressing locality, over a “resistant translation” that reminds readers that this text did not originate in English. The published text offers an “assimilationist ethic that is called for in popular aesthetic—the illusion of transparency” (Venuti 1998, 12).

Another way to analyze this is through the rhetorical concept of *markedness*. For students of translation, markedness constitutes the noticeable presence in the translation of stylistic features that “mark” the original text as distinctive—features that depart from conventional patterns of discourse. To mark this distinct Arabenglish by italicizing and transliterating lexical items according to local pronunciation would constitute a strategy of markedness in the translation, highlighting features that were particularly strong and effective in Arabic. Aware of the possible danger that transliterating “English” in this way—showing a usage and pronunciation that was not exactly that of anglophone readers—might stereotype characters, I felt it important to retain this distinctive lingo as an index of characters’ social status and predilections as well as of theme.23 I believed the characters were already so sympathetic (if not very complexly drawn) that this translational strategy would not detract from readerly appreciation or skew the politics of the text, embedded as it always would be in the larger politics of US public discourse on Saudi Arabia and its elite. To the contrary: if Western readers could become aware of the permeation of English in this particular Arabic, it might break down or complicate stereotypes, suggesting that a prevailing North American public discourse of binary opposition between “Arab” and “American” or “West” and “Islam” was oblivious to ways in which everyday practices of cultural belonging are deeply, mutually shaped by encounter rather than difference.24

Yet such marks of the translator’s presence might remind readers that there are two authors of the text. Erasing these distinct markers of the narrative, assimilating into the receiving culture’s terms, indeed to a lowest common denominator of literary style, also effaced traces of the second author’s labor. There seems little attention in the published rendering to translation as interpretation; perhaps in line with chick lit’s
focus on the surfaces of life, it privileges surfaces of the text. It appears that the first author drew on her power as a marketable author as well as on prevailing notions of translation mentioned above that privilege the authority of the first author over possible collaborative visions of the translation’s text production. Yet Alsanea’s insistence on disavowing the work of the translator seems puzzling unless one links it to her apparent desire to appear as sole author of the English text. The Anglo-Arabic hybridity in the Arabic-language novel is both echoed and distanced by the author’s claims to linguistic control of the text. She has to misrepresent the translation process in her public appearances, claiming a truly bilingual (rather than hybrid) facility that turns her into primary translator.

Translation studies theorist Mona Baker (2007) argues the need for “a framework that recognizes the varied, shifting and ongoingly negotiable positioning of individual translators in relation to their texts, authors, societies and dominant ideologies”; Baker finds that framework in social narrative, the construction of stories about self and society in which we all necessarily engage (152). Because this approach emphasizes “the complexity of being embedded in crisscrossing, even competing, narratives” (154), it allows us to consider first author and translator-author—and first author as self-appointed translator-author—as responding to varied and possibly conflicting (and shifting) narratives in their approaches to the text.25 For me as translator-author, embeddedness in certain narratives—of US state and non-state engagement with Arab societies, of prevailing and homogenizing images of “the Muslim woman,” and of cultural expression in Muslim-majority societies (images in which censorship, “tradition,” and lack of creative output dominate)—spurred my resistance to a translation practice that might support those homogenizing images. Alsanea might be embedded in some of the same narratives, but her situatedness is different and perhaps raised a different set of concerns governing her translational preferences. In Baker’s terms, she made different choices which “reframed” the translation, including self-presentation to journalists, a paratextual framing that also shaped how readers would come to the text. For both of us, the reception context for Girls of Riyadh was heavily determined by a discursive context in which “the Muslim woman” as a covered figure stands in for “Islam.” But how we handled that inescapable framing diverged. It may be that because
Alsanea was able to present herself as representing her society, offering a personal narrative to mediate some readers’ consumption of her novel, she did not feel a need to emphasize localities and differences in the text as I did. Alsanea’s “renarration” (Baker’s concept) of my “renarration” of her Arabic narrative suggests the power of situatedness in acts of translation.

For Baker, and based on social movements theory, framing may consist of “deliberate discursive moves designed to anticipate and guide others’ interpretation” of events (156; emphasis in the original). Alsanea and editors reframed the novel in English by altering my translation: they reduced the available feminist narrative that I had played up with my choices. I am not assessing “accuracy” here, but I would argue that my translation remains “closer” to the original Arabic in reproducing (not omitting) lexica, modes of address, and genres of cultural repartee. They effaced the available narrative of class and globalization that emerges in the Arabic through the use of Arabenglish. Such choices, Baker argues, are not random but are “embedded in and contrib[e] to the elaboration of concrete political reality” (158). Of course, my writing this and the previous essay in Translation Studies (2008), and my widely circulated letter to the editor of the Times Literary Supplement (2007) in response to its review of the translation, are also attempts to reframe the translation.

Another sort of framing concerns genre. The novel takes up different genre positions (raising different readerly expectations) in its different venues, as a work in Arabic published in the region and as a work in English traveling across a globalized pop-fiction market. In Arabic, the novel was something new, partaking of a cyber-savvy generation’s modes of expression while representing older Arab haut-bourgeois multilingualisms. Its teasing, tell-all premise, coupled with its Saudi provenance (a similar novel by a Lebanese author would likely not be received in the same way), also differentiated it from mainstream Arabic fiction. In the anglophone global pop-fiction marketplace, branded as chick lit, it was burdened with generic expectations of tantalizing content coupled with neo-Orientalist desires raised by its autobiographical framing and the broader context of popular feminine memoir “from behind the veil.” Perhaps this dual framing created certain pressures on me as translator and on Alsanea as author and then as editor (of my text) and would-be
translator. For me, the task was to “bring the reader to the work”—to insist on an English rendering that would defamiliarize the text, draw readers into its Arabic discursive world, complicate Orientalist desires, raise questions about the extent to which it could be read easily as a transplanted *Sex and the City*, and obligate audiences to take account of its political critique. For Alsanea and her editors, it appears, the task was to “bring the work to the reader”—to play up pop-lit affinities (whatever the author’s longer-term ambitions might be to transcend the popular fiction rubric), minimize its gender politics, and give it an easy popularity on the North American street which allows readers to comfortably consume the familiar Otherness of this story set in Saudi Arabia—as well as to sell copies.

**CONCLUSION**

Processes of translation form the intimate infrastructure of the product that results—hence of the images that surround us—and yet these processes, like the power relations that shape them, are so often invisible and unspoken. The context in which texts like *Girls of Riyadh* emerge includes the recent celebrity status of female writers of various national origins whose Muslimness is also paramount in their celebrity—framing, literally, their public face. Framing the text to showcase the Muslim woman author as homogeneously powerless and vulnerably brave (the specifically Saudi identity gives this particular purchase) helps to market her book as exposé and scandal, exotic yet familiar, within terms that a long history of Orientalist ethnographicism has made both possible and difficult to evade. Yet minimizing difference within the text tames that exoticism while the author controls her status as commodity through simultaneously claiming control of the translation process and effacing its political and economic tensions and effects.

Tension adheres between the (partially self-) produced image of the marketed author and the possible availability in the text of a critique of power relations and patriarchal society. Perhaps my rendering did not fit the image: demure yet vulnerable, brave yet accommodating, authentically exotic yet Westernized. My text attempted to display patriarchal critique while Alsanea’s/Penguin’s played it down and clichéd it, creating an easier read that some readers who wrote in liked, though not review-
ers in elite anglophone publications. Perhaps as cultural mediator and star between Chicago and Riyadh, Alsanea was not interested in questions of belonging and cultural power that Arabenglish might raise for an anglophone audience: the recognition that cultural and geographical boundaries are porous and that globalized marketing demands this, even as it may reify ideological borders and boundaries. Perhaps the real exposé is not of Saudi girls behind their abayas.

The persistence of the harem complex in popular Western perceptions of Middle Eastern societies gives female authors from the region distinct market authority. We can and should applaud unsettling effects that an image of an authoritative, vocal, and market-savvy author who happens to be female and Muslim might have on American readers’ understandings. Equally, though, we must ponder what meanings this carries for the production of English-language texts in the global-anglophone marketplace, and also what it says about the position of the translator as a cultural worker who is so often kept behind the scenes. The translator is a pivot point in intercultural conversations, a broker of discourses. Translators usually possess considerable cultural capital, as educated bilingual (at least) citizens of the world and often employees of elite educational institutions. Yet the translator is also a wage laborer in the transnational circuitry of representations, one who most often does not own the rights to her or his own work. Once a text is released into the public sphere, of course, circulating as a commodity while representing the democratic claims of intercultural conversation, it is owned above all by the readers who interpret it. But readers need to remain vigilant about the highly mediated processes and contestations that lie behind the word on the page. The transformation of *Banat al-Riyadh* into *Girls of Riyadh*—with a marketing and publicity apparatus encouraging readers to regard the author as translator and spokesperson, and the Americanization and de-politicization of the text in translation—suggests just how differentially local the transnational marketplace of literary production is. In this case, the local context that shapes the product is the provincial world of North Americans’ consumption of Arabic literature as world literature. One irony is that *Banat al-Riyadh*, in Arabic, is a novel about this very process: the translingual, commodification-laden self-fashioning of the young Saudi bourgeoisie.
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NOTES

1. In notes below I give minimal background information concerning editor-author-translator relations. Until the final stages of production, I was sole translator. All information on this is drawn from personal experience and published sources. I do not seek to represent anyone else’s perspective except as articulated in publicly available statements.

2. See Booth 2008 for elaboration. In that essay I drew on translation theory to suggest the implications of such translation practices for theorizing processes of literary translation.

3. Taking into account national specificities, Bourdieu’s (2008) analysis of the French publishing industry and literary translation’s role remains useful, sensibly warning against attributing everything to “globalization.” In a complexly striated and segmented publishing field that operates both within and across national cultures, various kinds of cultural and financial capital mark out particular positions and statuses for presses. “Literary” and university publishers, for example, tend to have smaller markets and a less visible presence in advertising and in major bookstore chains (though of course there are exceptions); they are often the houses that publish literary translations of authors well respected in their own national and regional cultures, while authors who achieve “global” best-selling status are taken up by the large multinational publishing concerns. Sapiro 2008 extends Bourdieu’s insights to a global market, while Jacquemond 1992 discusses hierarchies of publishing on the French scene, specifically with reference to Arabic literature in translation.

4. I do not mean to suggest that historically translators have been “invisible” only under capitalist structures, but the intersection of ideologies of individualism and modes of capitalist production has fostered this view of translation; under other regimes of culture production, translators have sometimes been regarded quite differently. See Venuti 1995.

5. The concept of “world literature” itself is an artifact of contemporary market forces including those of the academic marketplace, arising out of a transcontinental circulation of texts and pressures to “internationalize” Western university curricula and programs. It tends to label and ghettoize the study of Other places (English literature is not usually considered world literature) and often appears to connote literature in translation. Thus world literature is not only the literature of Other places but also that literature received through the medium of English (or, to a lesser extent, other major European languages). For a provocative look at this concept and its ramifications, see the Introduction and essays in Kumar 2003. See also essays in Prendergast 2004 and Saussy 2006.

6. With regard to Arabic literature, see Booth 1991; 2001, 278; 2003, 48. This is
a complex topic that entails issues of desire, psychological identification, exemplarity in literature, and the gaze; I have not the space here to offer a comprehensive bibliography. For one early formulation of this issue, see Brownstein 1994. For a particularly thoughtful treatment of “the desiring [female] subject” in modernity and the relations between consumerism, femininity, and reading, see Felski 1995.


8. This has been pointed out by several observers recently; a succinct presentation of issues is Allen 2009.

9. This is in contrast to one practice concerning cover images in arabophone polemics on Islam and gender regimes available in Egypt, at least, and published either there or in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Covers of didactic texts produced for Muslim female audiences quite often display a hijab-framed female face empty of features. In collections of didactic biography, this may suggest a reference to historical figures, for example, women of the Prophet’s family or community, since not representing their faces would be a mark of respect, a long attested representational practice. But in other cases, no reference to a historical figure is suggested. I discuss such texts (though not their visual import) in Booth 2001, chap. 8.


12. On this, see Lewis 2004 and Lewis and Micklewright 2006.

13. An “Ur-text” of these works in theme, tone, and implied audience was actually authored by an American married to an Iranian, Betty Mahmoody (*Not Without My Daughter*, 1987). Long predating 9/11 (like other similar works), it is explicable primarily within an Orientalist ethnographicist trajectory; significantly, some of these memoirs are notorious for heavily collaborative production, as many have pointed out; see e.g. Whitlock 2007.

14. One reader review on *Amazon.com* calls *Girls of Riyadh* “the best novel and memoir I have read this year” (Badou 2007).

15. Whitlock (2007, chaps. 2–5) discusses the iconography of memoir book covers, the uses of the burqa and hijab, and the commodification of the female Muslim face.

16. There are exceptions, such as the astute novelist Lorraine Adams (2008).

17. Zoepf’s (2007) introduction to her interview with Alsanea also erroneously claims that *Girls of Riyadh* is “one of the first books to appear in the Arab world that does so from the perspective of a female college student.” One might for instance think back to Latifa al-Zayyat’s landmark 1960 novel, *Al-Bab al-maftuh* (The open door). Alsanea’s success does seem to have sparked a run of works in a similar vein in Saudi Arabia; if her experience has gotten more young Saudi women to write and publish (Hammond 2007), that seems a good thing.

19. For more on the chick-lit characterization, see al-Ghadeer 2006 and Booth 2008.

20. For the record: Initially, Penguin apparently solicited several translation samples and then asked me to translate the novel, a choice approved (I was told) by the author. As I worked, responses to my requests to the author for consultation, and especially for help with Saudi colloquial usages, were mostly postponed due to her academic schedule, a delay I respected. Having heard nothing but enthusiasm from the project editor as (earlier) I submitted near-final drafts of most segments, after submitting my final draft I was informed abruptly that it was “unacceptable” and Alsanea would make what changes she wanted. The only choice I was permitted to make was whether to have my name on the title page.


22. See also Ahmed 2007; Beresford 2007; Henighan 2007; and Publishers Weekly, May 14, 2007, 32. Koning (2007) goes on to say, “Clunking phrases and clichéd images are found on every page.” If space allowed, it would be possible to show that many of these clichés are a product of the editorial process’s translation choices rather than being present in the Arabic text (or in my unpublished translation, which I do not have the right to quote without specific permission; it is the property of Penguin who insisted on paying me in a work-for-hire arrangement, common in the US translation marketplace, rather than allowing me a share in royalties, risk, and ownership of the product).

23. In Booth 2003, I consider the difficult issue of whether “resistant translation” might in fact consolidate cultural divides that translators hope to bridge by emphasizing “strangenesses” in the text and thereby creating an alienation effect for the reader.

24. On implications of these two views for Arabic-to-English translation, see Kilpatrick 2000, especially 435.

25. Baker’s nuanced approach emphasizes translators’ shifting choices within single texts, certainly relevant to this case but a level of analysis I have not the space to address here.

26. For examples, see Booth 2008.

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