METAMORPHOSES

MOHAMED EL-SAWI HASSAN


In vivid and captivating Arabic prose, Youssef Rakha reflects in his first novel The Book of The Sultan’s Seal on what it means to be an Arab and a Muslim after September 11, 2001, and offers an outlandish solution to this crisis. Before this novel, Rakha published a short story collection “Flowers of the Sun” (1999), poetry collections and three books about Arab cities. The Book of The Sultan’s Seal was published in Cairo less than two weeks after president Hosni Mubarak stepped down during the Egyptian Revolution in 2011. In his blog “The Sultan’s Seal,” Rakha mentions that his novel portrayed “a city that produced a revolution, three years before it happens.” The novel is a “tale of a man’s transformation during twenty-one days from a Europeanized intellectual to a semimadman who believed he could perform magic deeds to resurrect the Islamic caliphate” (p. 349). The language of the novel displays an amalgam of Arabic language levels or categories on the multiglossic continuum as a celebration of the inner dynamics of the Arabic language situation at its outer ends of standard and colloquial, and its liquidity and utter flexibility in the middle. Paul Starkey’s translation masterfully captured the novel’s language levels and referential nuances and presented creative translations of contemporary Cairene colloquial idioms. Starkey’s translation of Rakha’s The Book of the Sultan’s Seal, won the 2015 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation.

Mustafa Nayif Çorbacı, the novel’s main character, works as a journalist in a major institution in Cairo. After his divorce, for three weeks, he embarks on a journey through Cairo in search of his identity. He keeps a daily journal and draws his own map of the city that ended up looking exactly like the “tuğrâ,” the seal or signature, of Muhammad Wa- hid al-Din, or Mehmed VI (1861—1926), the 36th and the last Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, reigning from 1918 to 1922. As he reflects on the collapse of his marriage that just happened for no obvious reasons, he contemplates the inner details of the Egyptian society as a symbol of the deterioration of the Islamic identity. In his journey, Mustafa muses over thoughts of Salafism, sectarianism, nationalism, patriotism, Sophism, societal structures and patriarchal values, and his own complex relations
to such ideologies. During this period, he meets the ghost of the Sultan Muhammad Wahid al-Din who tasks him with an assignment that will later take him to Beirut. As his marriage and personal relationships continue to fall apart, and through his personal obsession with the Ottoman Empire and its history, the baffled Mustafa comes to the realization that he is a key player in the secret conflict between Islam and its enemies and that he has a major role to play in the revival of the Islamic nation. Through his journey and meticulous notes and drawings, Mustafa was able to redefine himself and his Cairo, the chaotic and perplexing city that has always been at the center of Islamic and Arabic history and is now suffering a social, political and institutional decline. He grapples with his own ideological affiliations and in his own fantasy world, manages to redeem his own Cairo, and to see a path forward.

The “Middle” or “Intermediate” Arabic register of the novel’s language binds classical, dialectal elements and loan words and throws that creative mix into a capturing imaginative and historic narrative that is presented in the most realistic terms of everyday life in Cairo. When it comes to Rakha’s linguistic choices, he draws on a wealth of classical Arabic allusions to, and quotations from Ibn Arabi, al-Jahiz, Ibn Hazm and Ibn al-Farid and many others, then mixes this level of language with colloquial Egyptian Arabic and frequent transliterations of foreign words. The quotations and intertextual references from the Qur’an, classical and modern Arabic writers reflect Rakha’s perception of his heritage as a continuum of human endeavors diachronically tied through language. The mixed or middle-Arabic of the novel is also remotely reminiscent of the language of prominent Arabic historians like Muhammad ibn Iyas (1448—1522) and Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti (1753–1825). One of the three appendices that appeared in the original Arabic version offers a glossary of the challenging Egyptian colloquial terms and transliterated words. The glossary in the Arabic edition is introduced by a quote from the Iraqi poet Sargon Boulus, in which he says “Arabic language, to me, is like an ocean that can absorb anything in its immensely vast existence. I think the time has finally come to deal with Arabic as a colossal repertoire, a live magnet that can absorb and digest foreign influence with the same ease and fluidity that it used to have in the past.” Rakha adopts this vision of code-switching and presents a lively and at times shocking mix of classical and non-classical features in his text that is not at all context-bound. In fact, there is only a limited correspondence between certain situations in the novel and the degree of classicization/colloquialization. The reader notices that the writer does not maintain the same stylistic
METAMORPHOSES

level throughout the text. Colloquial, foreign, or profane words sometimes come as a surprise to the reader in a way that subverts the canonical code-switching functions for the colloquial in a classical Arabic text: humor, amusement or ideology. We can also notice instances of code-mixing at the structural level, Rakha sometimes opts for the non-Arabic tag question structure in the follow up question after a statement: “No?” The foreignized feature in the Arabic original strikes the Arabic reader as a deviation from the norm and as a stylistic feature that may perhaps invoke questions about identity at the linguistic level, especially since the sudden and unexpected movement across language levels is not smooth and spontaneous, but rather, surprising and stunning.

Mustafa’s own map of his beloved, exhausted and confusing city, Cairo, his attempts to restore its missing history and identity, and the symbolic visual representations of his journey routes, and eventually, the sultan’s seal or the “tuğrâ” and its calligraphic meaning, help him reconstruct his own consciousness at many levels. The topography of the narration becomes one with the geography of Cairo in Mustafa’s tired, and sometimes hallucinating mind “as though Cairo were a geometric arrangement of infinite complexity, constructed of a multitude of surfaces interacting with one another, each surface made up of a million interlocking architectural shapes, each of which told a historical or geographical story independent of the rest.” (pp. 193-4) In the first weekend after his separation from his wife, Mustafa hangs out with his paranoid police officer turned-Salafi friend Amgad Salah, where a series of incidents lead him to purchase a silver ring with interesting Islamic calligraphy, that will later turn out to be the very seal of the last Ottoman Sultan and a replica of his own Cairo map. The unhinged Amgad Salah invokes the first chapter in the cosmic conspiracy that Mustafa is just about to be involved in. When Mustafa meets the ghost of the Sultan, he is told that he is one of seven people across the territories of the past Ottoman empire who are assigned to find seven parchments that have the text of the “Mariam” chapter in the Qur’an. The Sultan lost the parchments during his last journey from Istanbul to his final exile in Italy, and is convinced that finding these seven parchments is the first step towards overcoming the modern conspiracy against the Muslim nation. The fluid interplay of the standard Arabic and the colloquial in the text, visual representations, historical allusions and quotations and the clues that Mustafa finds along the way, united his personal sense of crisis with the historical crises of the Sultan and with the current dilemma of being an Arab and a Muslim after 9/11 “To be born a Muslim in this age means that you are perforce
a different person. Your historical formation is not a logical result of the situation you’re in… There are now only two choices for a way out: either to blend in with the age to such a degree that you forget you were born a Muslim; or to be a Muslim, narrow-minded extremist, mediocre, in line with the conditions of the age. There has to be a third choice.” (p. 179)

The complex calligraphic design of the Sultan’s tuğrâ, with its historic and nostalgic bearings becomes the nucleolus of the entire narrative structure. It is Mustafa’s personal Cairo path and his personal Cairo representation; its image that represents a lost and long sought-after identity binds his limited troubled world with the current predicament of the Islamic civilization and it leads him to question his own affiliations and identity. Mustafa reduces his personal space in Cairo to the calligraphy lines in the sultan’s seal in a vision to reserve and hold his Cairo in his hand and to own its new geography in a time when he feels alienated from his national, Arab and Islamic identities in a city without a memory. In addition to its visual representations of what is going on in Mustafa’s mind and the sad, suspicious, shocked and relieved portraits of Mustafa’s face, the text is purposefully burdened with parallel classical Arabic intertextual references to contextualize the historicity and the depth of what Mustafa is going through. It breaks language taboos and mocks classical expectations by infusing expletive expressions in the midst of nostalgic heritage classical Arabic without any attempts at euphemisms. The narrative structure of the book moves between Mustafa’s first person narration in the first, second, fourth, fifth and seventh Epistles of the book, while the reader is engaged with a limited omniscient third person narrator in the third, sixth, eighth and ninth Epistles. The novel adopts, and subverts, the classical form of a prologue, epistles or books, followed by a postscript of glosses, notes and commentaries. The general frame of the work is that of a letter that Mustafa Nayif Çorbacı writes to his friend Rashid Jalal al-Siyouti who has been living in the British capital since 2001. There is an unmistakable nostalgic and desperate allusion in
the friend’s name to the other Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (1445–1505 AD) who was an Egyptian religious scholar, juristic expert and teacher, and one of the most prolific Islamic theology writers of the Middle Ages. The allusion is perhaps, Mustafa’s attempt to reach out to history and to rid himself of his “zombie” state. Chronologically, Mustafa writes this letter on his way to and from Beirut while pursuing the parchment that will be the first step towards rebuilding the lost Ottoman Islamic caliphate. There are no definite conclusions for the novel—only a challenge to the reader to trace and make sense of the ideological, religious and historical affiliations and conflicts that both narrators, who are essentially Mustafa and another persona of his, express and agree on by the end of the novel. The author poses the questions of a conspiracy theory and mocks such questions at the same time through Mustafa’s pursuit of a clearer Muslim, national and Arab identity in his current “zombie” mindset that used to follow what others wanted him to follow with no questions asked. Eventually, there are no definitive answers, but it is perhaps this act of questioning the that Rakha contemplates that predicted an Egyptian Revolution in 2011. The circular narrative ends with another search that is about to begin in Beirut as if we have come a full circle without any sense of achievement or teleological fulfillment.

This masterful and fluid translation introduces the English reading public to a contemporary Arabic masterpiece that encapsulates important aspects of today’s Arabic/Muslim experience, culturally as well as linguistically.