



LITERARY TRANSLATION AS A PATHWAY TO THE 'HUMANISATION' OF EASTERN CULTURE: MANSOUR RAHBANI INTRODUCES THE EAST TO THE WEST THROUGH HIS POETRY

THE SOAS JOURNAL OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH

- Author:** Heba Albeity
- Department/Centre:** Department of the Languages and Cultures of the Near and Middle East
- Publication:** The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research,
Volume 10 (2016-17), Pages 121-130
Exploring fluid times: Knowledge, minds and bodies
- Stable URL:** <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/24685/>
- Key words:** Arab poetry – translation - Mansour Rahbani – Orientalism – misrepresentation - humanisation
- Licence:** Published under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial (CC-BY-NC) 4.0 International Licence

LITERARY TRANSLATION AS A PATHWAY TO THE 'HUMANISATION' OF EASTERN CULTURE: MANSOUR RAHBANI INTRODUCES THE EAST TO THE WEST THROUGH HIS POETRY

Heba Albeity
619099@soas.ac.uk
Department of the Languages and Cultures of the Near and Middle East

MANSOUR RAHBANI: AT THE DAWN OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM, UNDATED

بصباح الألف الثالث
بعد في جوع
وفي أطفال مشردين
وبكي ودموع

At the dawn of the third millennium
Still there is hunger,
Homeless children,
Lamentation,
And tears shed

خلينا ننهي الحروب يا دول القوية
لا للفقر
لا للقمهر
لا للعنصرية

O powerful countries, let us end the wars,
No to poverty
No to repression
No to racism

انت مين؟
أنا ما بسأل لكن حزنك قلبي مين
ولا يعرف أي لون وأي دين
يعرف انك خي
خي بالإنسانية

Who are you?
I ask you not, but your sadness tells all
I do not even see your colour or religion
I only know you are my brother;
My brother in humanity

بصباح الألف الثالث
في منفيين
في ناس بالمعتقلات صرلين سنين
خلينا بمطلع ها العصر
والدنية مشتاقه
ننهى الظلم
ننهى الخوف
وع العدل تتلاقى

At the dawn of the third millennium
Still there are people in exile
People linger in camps for years
At the dawn of our time,
While the world is yearning,
Let us end iniquity
End fear
And come together in justice

أنا من ها الشرق جاية
الإيمان أرض
ضيعنا مطلع الشمس ولون الزمان
من عنا لكل الشعوب منودي تحية
جيل يفغل وجيل يطل على وقع الحرية

From the East I come,
From the land of faith,
From our villages the sun rises and Time takes its colour
From here we extend our greetings to all nations
As a generation departs, another comes forth with the beat of freedom.

انت مين؟
أنا ما بسأل لكن حزنك قلبي مين
ولا بعرف أي لون وأي دين
بعرف انك خي
خي بالإنسانية

Who are you?
I ask you not
But your sadness tells all
I do not even see your color or religion
I only know you are my brother;
My brother in humanity

TRANSLATION AS A PATHWAY TO HUMANISATION

The Arab World has been experiencing challenging geopolitical and socioeconomic conditions since the breakout of the 2011 Arab uprisings. Countries like Libya, Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon have been either in de facto civil wars or in confrontations with the Islamic State (ISIS) or internal militias and other radical groups. Other Arab countries are suffocated

from inside by sectarianism and fanaticism and threatened by potential wars from outside. This caused a large number of Arabs to leave their countries not only for survival, but also in pursuit of better living conditions. According to the UNHCR's report issued in mid 2015, the total number of world refugees has reached 15.1 million, its highest level in 20 years, with the Syrian Arab Republic ranking as the largest source of refugees.¹ In other words, a large part of the Arab population has become either immigrants or potential immigrants.

This fact is changing the demographics of both the Arab world and the West simultaneously, and accordingly affecting bilateral cultural relations. One way to comprehend the cultural relations between nations is to study their cultural interactions, which are manifested in waves and trends of translation. For example, following the September 11 attacks translating Arabic literature into English flourished as a trend in large part due to the cultural tension that occurred in the aftermath. However, Sinan Antoon, a distinguished Iraqi poet, novelist, scholar and associate professor at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study, New York University, finds that most of the English translations of Arabic literature are 'cultural interrogation' of Arabic culture and do not necessarily express a real interest in it.² Edward Said also criticised the omission of literature and the humanities in the Near & Middle East studies in his *Orientalism* and asserted that the mentioned "omission" of Arabic literature "dehumanized" Arabs.³ In view of the unfolding events linked to terrorist attacks in recent years, stereotypical Western perceptions of Arab culture may be understandable due to the imposed misrepresentation of the mainstream Western media, which biased the average person in addition to disengaging him/her from the rest of the world. It is evident that a discourse of intolerance has stifled cultural exchanges. Therefore, it seems apposite to produce translations of Arabic poems as it can shed light on the aesthetics of Arab culture and may contribute to its 'humanisation' as a counterweight to the stereotypical image. Introducing Arabic literary works, in this case the Rahbani Brother's work to both, English-speaking lay audiences and academics, aims to serve as platform for more exposure to Arabic literature and a strategy to 'humanise' it without the 'cultural interrogation' Antoon referred to.

MANSOUR RAHBANI ADVOCATES THE REBIRTH OF THE DREAM OF FREEDOM

The poem written by Mansour Rahbani does not appear in any of his collections, which might suggest that he intended it to be sung, rather than read.⁴ Although the poem is undated, it is believed that it was written around the year 2000, when the album that includes the song was released. The opening of the poem 'at the dawn of the third millennium' further confirms this premise. It addresses the human family and emphasises its unity as it reflects the humanitarian status quo of the people of the world as one nation.

¹ UNHCR 2015.

² Sinan Antoon in a lecture in the American University in Cairo, AUC 2014.

³ Said 1979, P. 291.

⁴ The poem was sung by the Lebanese Singer Carole Samaha and was published on her official YouTube Channel on the following URL: <https://youtu.be/4JepjWaqPZU>.

Hence, its message is very important in the current times when the fear of terrorist attacks is conditioning people all over the world. Apart from the conflict zones in the Arab region, many Western countries became a target of accelerated terrorist attacks. For example, the United Kingdom experienced several terrorist attacks, such as the Westminster attack, the Manchester Arena bombing, the London Bridge attack and the Buckingham Palace incident.⁵ A shift in the way we view the world as a unified humanity is much needed to secure the ideal of a global interconnected world. In fact, no real change will occur without if we do not strengthen our sense of responsibility towards the world and our sense of belonging to each other, regardless of our differences.

Therefore, when Rahbani composed his poem, there was urgency in depicting the paradox of entering the third millennium while still being in a world that is filled with 'hunger', 'homeless children' and 'lamentation'. The poem explicitly calls for 'powerful countries' to end wars because there is nothing such as a 'justified war'. This call suggests that it is a time when we have to decisively reject all pretexts for war, including 'poverty', 'repression' and 'racism'. Under no circumstances should we let 'religion' or 'colour' determine how we see humans or how we relate to them. Because 'sadness' is what brings people together and makes them brothers 'in humanity', it is also a universal identification and language. Hence, asking one: 'who are you?', asking to know his/her religion, language, or race is pointless because it should not matter. In fact, this is a revolutionary redefinition of the conventional conception of identification that limits people to the geographical borders and racial ties they get associated with and conditioned to when they are born. This redefinition can liberate people, for it allows them to be what they choose to stereotypical labels and social classifications.

In addition, the poem is a reminder of the current situation of civil rights in the world; we still see 'people in exile' and others who 'linger in camps for years'. Although the reason behind their imprisonment cannot be inferred here, we sense the long waiting and see their tiresome depersonalisation in the image of them behind bars. Such an image visualises repressed nations who lived in 'fear', and inciting us -as a unified human family- to live up to our responsibility and take action, 'end iniquity' and 'come together in justice'. Furthermore, Mansour keeps reminding us of our time and connects it to the insistent longing of the world for liberation.

Contrary to its current association with ignorance, barbarism and terrorism by Western media Mansour attempts to introduce the East to the world as the 'the land of faith' in the last part of the poem. Faith here is a spiritual conception that is unrelated to any religious or ideological belief, which is consistent with the overall vision of the Rahbani works. In fact, the only values the Rahbani Brothers, also known as the Rahbanis or the Brothers, advocate in their works are, dreaming, a vision or of goodness, beauty, love, justice and freedom. This is the 'faith' referred to because it is the faith they embrace and from which the 'sun rises'. The ability to see clearly accompanies the rising of the sun after hours of darkness that conceal vision. Therefore, the sun rising here symbolises the uncovering of the truth of the East. As we see it with such a human eye, we refrain from 'dehumanising' its culture and people. In fact, a human vision is much needed to see the land of the East, just as any other human land; a source of inspiration and knowledge that leads to enlightenment, civilisation

⁵ BBC 2017.

and justice. Last but not least, the poem sends a positive message to the whole world to affirm that the new generation will not accept to quit dreaming for freedom and will witness its rebirth.

DIVING IN THE RAHBANI WORLD

Mansour Rahbani or *Manṣūr Al-Raḥbāni* makes the second pole of the Rahbani Brothers along with his brother Assi Rahbani (1923- 1986). Mansour was born in 1925 in Antelias, which is located five kilometres to the north of Beirut.⁶ The Rahbani Brothers are the only Arab artists who transcended their personal selves and egos and succeeded in creating a collective self under which they signed both their names 'the Rahbani Brothers' or 'al-Akḥawayn Raḥbāni'. The Rahbani Brothers are well known by Arab audiences as the founders and pioneers of musical theatre in the 20th century in Lebanon and the wider Arab world. However, their contribution to the Arabic artistic scene in the 20th century unquestionably reached beyond the theatrical aspect, as they were songwriters, poets, musicians and composers in addition to being playwrights/dramatists. As a matter of fact, it is unanimous that their production was simultaneously prolific in the spheres of music, poetry, drama, films, television series and programmes, while constantly maintaining a high quality at all fronts.

Therefore, Samim AlSharif, among many others, considers them to be one of the "most important artistic phenomena" that emerged in the Arabic scene in the second half of the 20th century because of the unity and consistency they managed to create within their works.⁷ According to Muhammad Dakrūb and Nizār Murūwah, the singularity of the 'Rahbani phenomenon', which emerged in the late 50s and lasted until Assi Rahbani's death in 1986, is manifested in their protest of conventional artistic traditions such as *Tatrib* resulting in the "development of Arab art".⁸ Most importantly, the Rahbani text is "not a historical text that is ruled by incidents and constants" but has a "comprehensive" feature, which makes it "unrestricted to the time of its presentation and is not ended in the place of its presentation".⁹ In fact, it is integrated in the daily life of the Lebanese as it is implanted in the collective popular memory. Rajaa Chouairi established that the "discourse" and "imagery" of the Brother's theatre has "penetrated deeply the language and the discourse of people, schools, history books and everyday life".¹⁰ In fact, part of his academic fieldwork was dedicated to monitoring expressions, sayings and references, found even across newspapers, to the Rahbani work.¹¹ This is because the Rahbani Brother's works have always been a true expression of Arabs' concerns, joys, fears and aspirations. In other words, they have been faithful carriers of the 'Arabic Plight' or what is referred to in Arabic as 'al-Hamm al-ʿArabi'. In fact, some critics consider them to be the embodiment of 'Arabic conscience' or

⁶ This is inferred from my readings of different sources on the lives and childhoods of the Rahbani Brothers.

⁷ Aliksan 1987, P. 287. Aliksan quotes from *Jaridat Tishrin*, issue 1001 dated 27-12-1978.

⁸ Dakrūb and Murūwah 1998, P.115.

⁹ Raḥbāni 2003, As in Henri Zughayb's introduction.

¹⁰ Chouairi 2006, P.19-20.

¹¹ Ibid.

'al-ḡamīr al-ʿArabi' in addition to being a "Lebanese artistic and human conscience".¹² Hence, finding relevance between their works and the Arab sociopolitical realities is quite easy, especially when considering the balance they maintained between their idealistic visions and their practical causes, which advocate social change.

As a matter of fact, the Rahbani's view of theatre and its role in transformation and social change is expressed in the play *Nās Min Waraq* in a dialogue between Maria, who is an actress in a traveling theatrical troupe and performed by the Arab diva Fayrūz, and Dīb, one of the men organising the electoral campaign of the parliamentary candidate 'Ḍāhir al-Bandar'. Attempting to distract him from implementing his boss' orders to stop the performance, claiming that it is disturbing him while preparing for his electoral speech, Maria tries to convince Dīb that he is a good actor and that he should join the troupe. Promising to give him the role of a member of parliament on stage, she explains to him that the actions of actors don't harm anyone as the actions of people in real life do; "On the stage you can sell a country, but there is a difference; the country wouldn't be sold in reality. You can kill people on stage, but the dragger doesn't hurt. You can oppress, but your oppression doesn't harm anyone".¹³ Even though it doesn't affect reality directly, Maria refers to the transformational power of words on stage, Maria reaffirms; "Despite of that, words on the stage, thunder, resound and change".¹⁴ This statement shows that 'change' is what the Brothers see theatre evoking in society and what they hope to achieve through their theatrical works. Not only that, it also reflects their wish to revive faith in the long-term role that theatre can play in transformation and social change.¹⁵

After the death of Assi Rahbani on 1986, Mansour continued to work alone. He composed a number of twelve works for theatre, the musical composition *The Holy Mass*, two works for television and published six collections of poems or *diwans*. He was known for his fascination with history, which was evident in his depictions of historical figures and contemporary interpretations of historical incidents. The orchestration of his plays, their stage direction and scenography in addition to the universalism of the text made them meet international theatrical standards. Mansour continued to work and produce poems, musical compositions and plays until his death in January 2009.

SIGNIFICANCE OF TRANSLATING THE RAHBANI WORKS

The fact that the Rahbanis have written in colloquial Lebanese had significantly affected the study and translatability of their works. Christopher Stone, the most known English-speaking scholar to write about the Rahbani phenomenon, talked about 'the academic marginalisation of theater' and referred it to the problematicity of the 'use of colloquial language in literature', both in Europe and the Arab World:

¹² Aliksan 1987, P. 22.

¹³ Raḡbānī 2003, from the play 'People of Paper' or 'Nās Min Waraq'.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The methods the Brothers implemented in their works to achieve the mentioned transformation and social change will be the subject matter of the author's PhD dissertation.

While the use of colloquial language in literature written in European languages has not been completely unproblematic (Anderson 1991), it remains a highly contentious issue in the Arab World for a variety of political, cultural, and religious reasons.¹⁶

Because of its 'divergence' from the Classical Arabic in which the Qurān is written and according to which its standards are judged, Arabic-speakers "do not usually consider their spoken language to be worthy of being written down".¹⁷ The fact that Arabic-speakers look down at spoken languages delayed and sometimes hindered the collection of Arabic theatrical works written in dialects. Therefore, traditionally there has existed a big controversy around collecting the theatrical works of the Rahbanis in print. However, their works were collected and printed in over 20 volumes by the Lebanese poet Henri Zughayb in 2003. The reasons cited above have also caused the lack of translations of their full works into Western languages.

In addition, the nonexistence of the texts of plays made them inaccessible and difficult to study. Moreover, having been written in colloquial Lebanese, it is unsurprising that most of the research, which has been done on the Rahbani Brother's Theatre so far, is in Arabic. In fact, this is Stone's main explanation for why research on theatre "has been even more shunned in academic circles than has theatre in the West".¹⁸ Musical theatre written in dialect was even 'more ignored critically' than theatre written in classical Arabic.¹⁹

Furthermore, the nonexistence of Rahbani printed texts until 2003, along with the mentioned 'marginalisation', complicated the translation of their theatrical works into other languages even further. For texts, which are unavailable in their original language, are unlikely to be found in other languages and, therefore, may not be known by others who do not speak their original language. As a result, the works have become vulnerable to misrepresentations by Western scholars who studied them imperfectly. Christopher Stone's *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and the Rahbani Nation*, the main English source on the Brother's Theatre, is a good example of such misrepresentations. Even though his book serves as a guidebook that exposes researchers to a wide range of scholarship commenting on the phenomenon, it does not highlight the unique characteristics they brought to the theatrical experience in the Arab world. Disregarding extensive and independent literary analysis of the works of the Brothers, the poetic aesthetic aspect of the experience is overshadowed and even restricted by the historical contextualisation in Stone's study. Most importantly, Stone's misconception of the Brothers' works is objectified in his argument that their artistic project was prone to incite tension within Lebanon.²⁰ Stone himself refutes this argument when he states in his article "Fayrouz, the Brothers, and Jerusalem, and the Leba-stinian Song" that despite being Christian, Fayrūz and the Brothers are 'never consciously or publicly associated with Lebanon's right-wing Christian nationalists and in fact saw themselves as forces of unity and inclusion'.²¹ Such

¹⁶ Stone, *Nation, Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Rahbani*. 2008, P. 6.

¹⁷ Stone 2008, P. 7.

¹⁸ Ibid. P. 7.

¹⁹ Ibid. Stone quoting from Shawul 1989, P. 471.

²⁰ Stone, *Fayruz, The Rahbani Brothers, Jerusalem, and the Leba-stinian Song* 2005, P. 157.

²¹ Ibid.

contradictions and misconceptions of English sources on the phenomenon underscore the need for introducing the works to, non-Arabic audiences and academics. However, introducing the Rahbani works to these audiences requires the production of adequate literary translations of the works themselves.

Even though some poems written by Mansour Rahbani had been translated into English, no official English translation of the above poem is found or known to exist. The song has been poorly subtitled in English. In addition, an unofficial English translation was found online.²² Not only did it have major mistranslations, (e.g. it mistranslated 'beauty' for 'sadness'), but it also missed out the poetic aspect and sense of the text.

The translation presented here attempts to reflect the meaning of the poem, as well as capture its poetic spirit. For example, the part reciting 'Who are you? I ask you not, but your sadness tells all' sounds more poetic than the translation found online, which had it as, 'Who you are is something I would not question, but your beauty told me who you are'.²³ As it is hard not to see the colour of someone or to deduce his/her religion from certain factors, translating the verb 'know' literally was avoided and replaced by 'see', since it conveys the intended meaning. Using the first person, Mansour wanted to affirm that even though I, a human being, can see the differences between humans, I act as if we do not see it. In other words, we choose not to 'see' our differences despite the fact that we are capable of seeing. That's what makes the 'unseeing' here such an admirable gesture, 'I do not even see your colour or religion', especially with the stress of the word 'even' before the statement. The mystery of the magical gesture is resolved when the explanation comes, 'I only know you are my brother'. In addition, the choice of words was careful and accurate in order to deliver the imagery, the poetic state and mode of the poem. For example, the word 'linger' gives the sense of the long waiting and the connotation of dullness of 'stillness'. Moreover, the word 'yearning' depicts the intensity of the feeling of longing for the end of iniquity and fear, and meeting justice. Last but not least, the order of sentence was changed sometimes in view of maintaining the inner musicality and smoothness of the poem. For instance, 'Still there are people in exile' replaced 'there are still people in exile'.

In conclusion, the importance of translating literary texts written in dialects consists in breaking down taboo around them in addition to taking them seriously. As for the broader translation of Arabic literature into English, it can contribute to 'humanising' Arabic culture and can serve as a counterbalance to conventional stereotypical images. Not only does it encourage the production of other translations, but it also motivates authors to keep writing as critics and researchers to continue finding literary works valuable to study.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aliksan, Jān. *al-Raḥbānīyūn wa-Fayrūz: alf 'amal fannī, khamsūn 'āman min al-'aṭā'*. Damascus: Dār Ṭalās, 1987.

²² The translation can be found on the link below: <http://lyricstranslate.com/en/bi-sabah-el-alf-el-talet-بصباح-الثالث-الألف-dawn-third-millenni.html>.

²³ Ibid.

AUC. "Translation as Mourning." Lecture by Sinan Antoon. YouTube video, 1:21: 41, April 22, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9ehd8nbFFY>

"Carole Samaha - Bi sabah el alf el talet (English translation)." Lyrics Translate, January 2, 2013, <http://lyricstranslate.com/en/bi-sabah-el-alf-el-talet-%D8%A8%D8%B5%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB-dawn-third-millenni.html>

Chouairi, Rajaa. *The Sword Breaks, the Song Continues: Literacy in the Raḥbāni Brothers' Work of Art*. Prod. Hofstra University. Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2006.

Dakrūb, Muḥammad, and Nizār Murūwah. *Fī al-mūsīqā al-Lubnānīyah al-'Arabīyah wa-al-masraḥ al-ghinā'ī al-Raḥbānī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fārābī, 1998.

Raḥbani, al-Akhawayn. *al-a'māl al-masraḥīyah al-kāmilah 'The Complete Theatrical Works'*. Edited by Hinrī Zughayb. Vol. 1. Jūnīyah: Dīnāmīk Ghrāfik lil-Ṭibā'ah wa-al-Nashr, 2003.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Vol. 1st. New York: Vintage Books ed., 1979.

Samaha, Carole. "Be Sabah El Allf El Talet," YouTube video, 6:42, February 25, 2013, <https://youtu.be/4JepjWaqPZU>.

Stone, Christopher Reed. "Fayruz, the Raḥbani Brothers, Jerusalem, and the Leba-stinian Song." In *Jerusalem - Idea and Reality*, edited by T. Mayer and Mourad, 155-167. London: Routledge, 2005.

—. *Nation, Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Raḥbani*. London: Routledge, 2008.

"Timeline of British Terror attacks." *BBC*, June 19, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-40013040>

UNHCR. "UNHCR Mid-Year Trends 2015." *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*. Geneva, 2015, http://www.unhcr.org/dach/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2017/04/Mid-Year_Trends_2015.pdf

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heba Albeity is a Saudi fiction writer, researcher and journalist. She earned her Bachelors of Arts in English Language & Literature with the first rank of honour from *Taibah University* in Madinah (Saudi Arabia) in 2004. She won the second place in the competition "Saudi Promising Writers in the USA" for one of her short stories in 2007. She earned her Master of Arts in Humanities (humanistic studies) from *Marymount University* in Arlington (Virginia, USA) in 2010. Her graduate programme investigated the disciplines of history, art history, philosophy and literature. At the professional level, she has worked as a translator and editor for some international organisations, including the *International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ)* and others. She taught as a lecturer of English language and literature in *AlBayan Colleges (University of Prince Mugrin)* and the *Open Arab University* in Madinah (Saudi). She

contributed as a columnist to many prominent Saudi papers such as *Okaz* and *Al-Watan*. She has recently been awarded *Naji Naaman' Literary Prize* (Creativity Prize) for the fifteenth cycle (2016-2017) in recognition of one of her poetic texts and became an honorary member of the *Madison Naaman pour la Culture*. Heba is a PhD student at the department of Near & Middle East Languages & Cultures at SOAS, University of London. She is working on the sociocultural role of theatre in Arab societies, employing the Rahbani Brother's Theatre as a model.