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## [On Being Wanderers in a Cosmopolitan City: A Conversation with Wen-chin Ouyang](#)

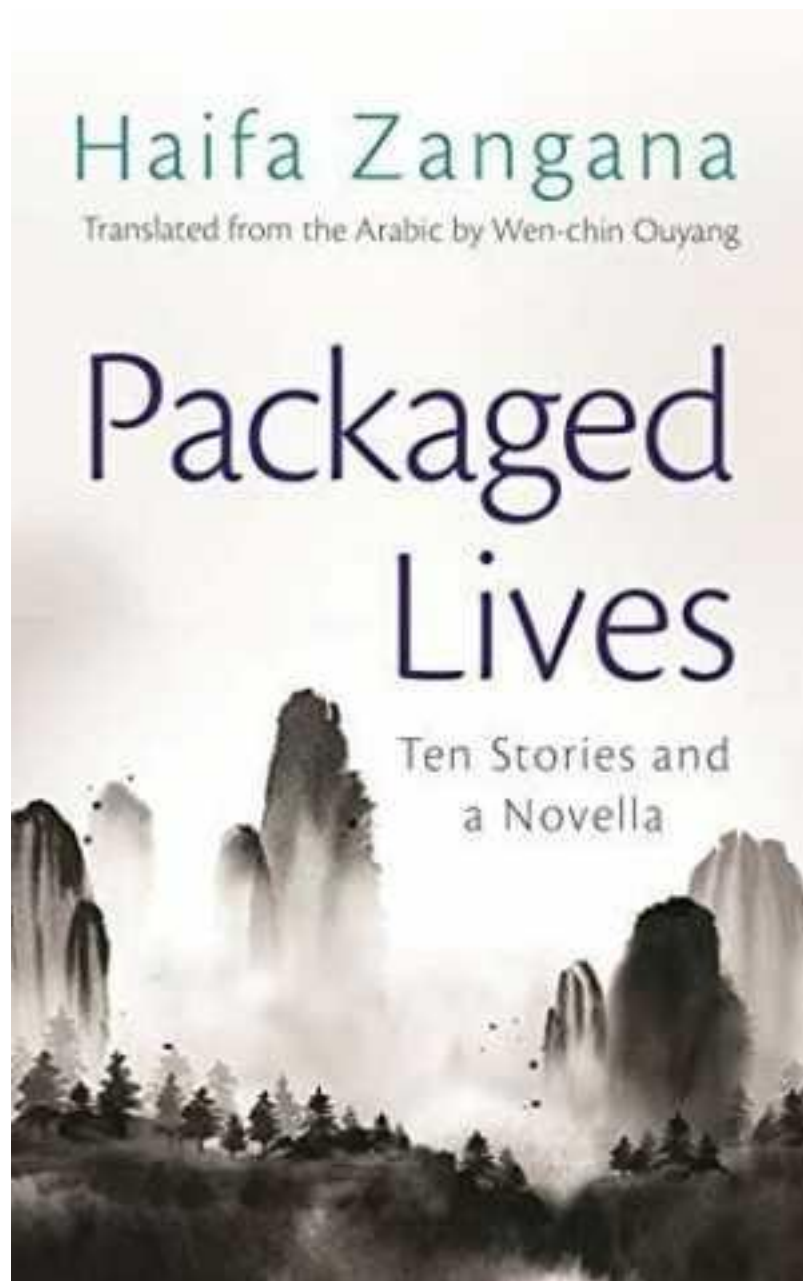
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**By Tugrul Mende**

This autumn, Syracuse University Press will publish a short story collection by author Haifa Zangana: *Packaged Lives: Ten Stories and a Novella*. Zangana's work has previously appeared in English — her *Dreaming of Baghdad* came out in 2012, and her articles and essays have appeared in many news outlets.

Yet *Packaged Lives* is the first time English-language readers will have access to a book of Zangana's short stories, here translated by [Prof. Wen-chin Ouyang](#). The two are long-time friends, and this short story collection — among other things — is a homage to their friendship. In this interview, Professor Ouyang talked about why she translates, what it means to live in London, and how translating *Packaged Lives* got her through some of the darkest days of her life.

**When did you first read Haifa Zangana's work and why did you want to translate her?**



**Wen-chin Ouyang:** I met Haifa soon after I moved to London in 1997 at an event organized by a colleague at SOAS. I have been following her writing since then. Her creative work transcends national boundaries. Her memoirs, her novels, and her short stories speak to all of us. For example, the first short story by Haifa Zangana I translated, “Trafalgar Square,” “Darba” in Arabic, which means a punch, is about a woman activist walking through central London who gets beaten up in Trafalgar Square because she is perceived as a “foreigner.” The story captures the experience of many Londoners who seem to come from elsewhere. Racism and sexism are very much a part of the experience of migrants and wanderers or Sindbads even in a cosmopolitan city like London. People tend not to see this dark side of London. In our time, at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, we are schooled in anti-racism and political correctness and you don’t think that you would encounter racism in London. The scary part is that it is everywhere and it is multilateral. It comes from all directions that you don’t know where it is coming from. I wanted to make

Haifa Zangan's work known to a wider English reading public because the topics she writes about are close to all of us.

### **Why did you choose these particular stories of hers to translate?**

**WO:** I don't translate professionally. I translate for friendship and my students. For example, I translated for *Banipal* among others an excerpt of Walid Shurafa's [\*Heir of the Tombstones\*](#), and for Haifa, at her request, a chapter of *Dreaming of Baghdad*. I will hopefully translate her novel, *Keys to a City*, because she asked me. *Packaged Lives* is also a friendship project, but it happened spontaneously. We were having lunch on a sunny day in a Kurdish restaurant near where I've lived for more than ten years, and while we discussed our news, Haifa's stories came up. Mundher, her husband, and I decided that he should choose his favorite stories from the three collections published in the 1990s,\* and I would translate them into English after I have looked at them, accept all or veto some, and add my own selections. She might have given me *Hayāt mu'allaba* (*Packaged Life*, 2007) that day. I can't remember, and I can't remember whether I vetoed any of Mundher's selections either. I ended up with the ten stories and a novella in *Packaged Lives*, after adding the six stories of *Packaged Life*. These stories have one thing in common. We bring to our present something from our past, and to our new homes things from our old homes. The protagonists are Iraqis living in London. They are haunted by their pasts, and they live in London as if they were still in Baghdad.

### **Why is the collection called *Packaged Lives*?**

**WO:** The title of the English translation is taken from her novella, *Hayāt mu'allaba*, and made into plural to reflect the multiplicity of the prison-houses we live in. Each story is about the cost of living as you are expected to do. We seem able to choose how we want to live, but in reality we all live in ready-made boxes (of expectation) and it is very difficult to come out of them. An Iraqi activist in London remains locked in the political role he played in Baghdad. Husbands, wives, and sons, for examples, must play their role as society expects of them. They live in the prison-houses of their intellectual and emotional entanglement.

### **While working on the short story collection, what difficulties did you encounter in translating them? How much was the author part of the translation process?**

**WO:** Because I have spent time with Haifa and Mundher, when I read the stories, I hear their voices and see how they interact. This makes the texts come alive, and it helps me render her stories in, let's say, a live English. The stories are not autobiographical, but they are informed by the lived experiences of Iraqis in exile who have retained their local or regional language. I did have to double-check with her the meaning of local expressions and words, particularly some Iraqi proverbs and bird names. These are not in MSA and you won't find them in dictionaries. Religious expressions are another challenge. How do you introduce Shi'ite inflections into an English translation of an Islamic idiomatic expression that is used by both Sunnis or Shi'ites but would acquire a particular sectarian meaning in reception? Of course maintaining the musicality, rhythmic patterns, and pace of her Arabic while threading conceptually her evocative narrative offered some serious challenges as well.

### **What makes her stories special and how would you describe them?**

**WO:** Haifa is a conceptual writer. She writes about experience through the mind. She captures complexity through narrative, and I wanted to be able to convey the nuances of her thought. This was the real challenge. How do I capture the nuances while keeping to the simplicity of her language? I focused on threading the building blocks of her narrative, and using them to escalate conceptually and emotively until it is possible to comprehend the complexity of her thought, and the world she creates with words. If you read her closely, you will find that she builds up a mental world for you but of all of a sudden she takes it apart again.

**You are publishing this collection within the “Middle East Literature in Translation” Series at Syracuse. Was it difficult to find a publisher for this short story collection?**

**WO:** This is a “friendship project,” as I said, and I offered the translation to another friend, Michael Beard, who co-edits the series. Michael is an admirer of Haifa and her work, and he supported the project even as the press took it through the peer review process. Thankfully, the peer reviews are positive, so it was smooth sailing all along.

**When you start translating a story, do you have any special method that you keep to while translating it? Is there a difference for you to translate for an academic work or a literary work?**

**WO:** I was grieving at the time, and I worked on it every day. Translation helped me get through the day. Even though I was on leave, I was unable to do creative work—and research is creative—so I used translation as my creative outlet. Haifa is a friend, and translating her every day felt like having her close by all the time. Her stories are meditative. Translating her became a ritual for me. It got me through some of the darkest days of my life.

**What other works would you like to translate?**

**WO:** In addition to Haifa Zangana’s *Keys to a City*, I would like to finish my translation of another Iraqi writer, ‘Abd al-Khaliq al-Rikabi’s novel, *Seven Days of Creation*. Chapter 1 appeared in *Banipal* as early as 2008. The other text I want to translate is a classical work on passion by Ibn al-Jawzi called *Dhamm al-hawa*. It is foundational in classical Arabic literature (*adab*), narrative tradition and storytelling, and it deserves to be made available to a wider readership.

\*The three collections are *Bayt al-naml* (The House of Ants 1996), *Ab’ad minnā narā* (Beyond Our Horizon, 1997) and *Thammata ākhar* (There is Such Other, 1999)

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*Tugrul Mende is a regular contributor to ArabLit.*