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Translating Hybrid *Mahjar* Literature: Three Poems by Mikhail Naimy

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Between 1880 and 1914, an estimated one third of the total population of Greater Syria (present-day Syria, Lebanon, Occupied Palestine, and Jordan) emigrated to Egypt and the Americas (Khater 8). During that period, numerous authors from the Levantine area were producing what came to be known as *Mahjar*¹ literature. This period of intellectual awakening of the nineteenth century referred to as the *Nahḍa*² or *renaissance* of Arabic literature was a period of intellectual modernization that has transfigured Arabic literature for years to come. *Mahjar* authors were known to have freed themselves from the shackles of traditional Arabic poetry, rather finding inspiration in European Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, and to have favoured the use of “short metres and a lyrical and melancholic tone” (Khalifa 318).

Mikhail Naimy³ (1889-1988) was a Lebanese philosophical essayist, novelist, and poet of the *Mahjar* school. Naimy was born in Baskinta, a village in Mount Lebanon, where he attended a school ran by Russian missionaries, which highly influenced him and led him to move to the Russian Teachers’ Institute in Nazareth at only thirteen to further his studies. Naimy later moved to Poltava, Ukraine to pursue his education, and then to New York, where alongside his fellow countrymen and *Mahjar* writers Gibran Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), Elia Abu Madi (1890-1957), and Ameen Rihani (1876-1940), he was member of *Al-Rabita Al-Qalamiyya*, also known as The Pen League.⁴ The Arab-American literary society’s *raison d’être* was, in Naimy’s own words, “to lift Arabic literature from the quagmire of stagnation and imitation, and to infuse a new life into its veins so as to make of it an active force in the building up of the Arab nations and to promote a new generation of Arab writers” (Levinson and Ember 864). The Pen League dissolved with Gibran Kahlil Gibran’s death in 1931 and Naimy’s return to Lebanon in 1932. In a time of conflicting alliances in the Levantine area, the position of The Pen League was to encourage hybrid literature – a constructed form of literature drawing inspiration from the West – with the purpose of introducing Arab audiences to Western literary styles. In fact, The Pen League aimed at rethinking the form and essence of Arabic literature, using a simple language that is abundant with imagery and symbolism to meditate on the mysteries of existence, the elements of nature, and on values such as beauty, justice, love, and truth (Popp).

Mahjar writer Mikhail Naimy has left a legacy of forty-one published books. As a multilingual, Naimy often wrote in Arabic, Russian, and English. The literary output of the prolific writer includes novels like *Mudhakkirāt al-’Arqaš* (1948), translated by the author himself into English under the title *The Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul; or, the Pitted Face* (1952), as well as *The Book of Mirdad* (1948), written in English and later translated by Naimy into Arabic. The author is also known for writing Gibran Kahlil Gibran’s biography (1936), which

¹ The term *mahjar* is a term derived from the Arabic word *hijra*, meaning migration, and comes from the root h-j-r, meaning to emigrate from one’s own land and take up residence in another country. Generally, the term *mahjar* means “country of emigration”, and it is used in the context of literature to refer to the *Mahjar* writers who had emigrated to America around the turn of the 20th century.

² Derived from the Arabic root n-h-d which signifies “to rise”, “to stand up”, the term *nahḍa* refers to *Al-Nahḍah Al-Adabiyyah*, a nineteenth century Arabic literature movement inspired by encounters with the West.

³ Penname used by the author whose name is also sometimes transliterated as *Mikhā’il Nu’aymah*.

⁴ *Al-Rabita Al-Qalamiyya* is also sometimes referred to as The Pen Bond or The Pen Association.

he then translated into English. His other famous works include his memoirs titled *Sab'ūn: ḥikāyat 'umr* (1959-1960) or *Seventy: Story of a Lifetime, Al-Ghirbal* (1923) or *The Sieve*, a literary critical article, and a collection of poetry titled *Hams al-jufūn* (1928) or *Eyelid Whisperings*.

Mikhail Naimy's writings covered a plethora of topics ranging from war to the metaphysical nature of things. His output was also highly influenced by his personal experiences. Naimy's poem titled '*Akhi* (My Brother) was inspired by his deployment as an American soldier in World War I at the Normandy front to fight the Germans. During that period, Naimy realized the atrocities of war, while away from the famine that was ravaging Mount Lebanon⁵ under the despotic rule of the Ottoman Empire. In that particular poem Naimy addresses his brother with a defeated tone, inviting him to bury the living, as war, drought, and famine have left no hope in the land. Naimy's writings also verge towards the mystical. In another poem titled *Man 'Antī Yā Nafsī?* (Who Are You My Self?), Naimy addresses the self in a state of awe and perplexity, personifying and glorifying it at the same time. His most famous philosophical work *The Book of Mirdad* (1948) describes the soothing presence of a God that is within, a notion often highlighted by Naimy who writes in his autobiography, "The war made me realize that there is no distance between the creator and the creatures" (M. Naimy 101). This Sufi⁶ notion of unity with the Creator, known in Arabic as *Waḥdat al-wujūd* and often translated as Unity of Existence or Oneness of Being, is one of the key foundations of Naimy's philosophy. Many allusions to other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Sufism as well as the Orthodox Christianity of his upbringing, can also be found in his writings. In fact, Naimy grew disinterested in organized religion at an early age, in favour of an individual spiritual journey that encapsulates beliefs from different religions, both Eastern and Western. In fact, the writings of Mikhail Naimy, like those of his *Mahjar* peers, bridge the chasm between East and West, allowing readers to experience a hybrid literary genre that is marked by different creeds, cultures, identities, and literary traditions.

Arabic Literature and Poetry in Translation

Translating literature is both a challenging and valuable endeavour. Peter Newmark notes that, unlike a non-literary piece of writing, a literary text with its connotations and stylistic features, serves as an allegory and an evaluation of society at a certain time and setting in history. To translate into another language is therefore also an attempt to transfer into another language-culture the author's set of beliefs and thoughts. Moreover, although translation inevitably entails the loss of certain aspects or connotations of an original, it allows the transfer of a piece of literature that would otherwise remain uncharted territory on account of the absence of fluency in a given language. Translators can therefore assume the role of mediators who attempt to bridge the linguistic gap, bringing two cultures closer and allowing an exchange of ideas and traditions. In fact, as Newmark notes, "the signal importance of the translation of some novels has been the introduction of a new vision injecting a different literary style into another language-culture" (111). This is the case of the *Mahjar* school, which has infused both Arabic and English traditions into literary texts.

⁵ The Great Famine of Lebanon (1915-1918) was the result of several factors, both political and environmental. Although the lack of consensus makes it difficult to measure the precise number of casualties, historians believe the death toll to be as high 200,000 deaths, that is half the population of Mount Lebanon at the time.

⁶ Sufism or *tasawwuf* is the mystical Islamic belief in which believers seek to find truth and knowledge through a direct and personal experience of God.

Arabic and English are two languages that do not belong to the same family. In fact, Arabic with its roots and patterns system can be described as a language with a very rich and nuanced lexicon. Most literary texts are written in what is known as Modern Standard Arabic, which is the standardized, written form of the language. This has left Arabic-speaking nations in a state of diglossia, in which the written and spoken forms diverge to a great extent, and it has left translators with many issues related to register and equivalence. Moreover, from a linguistic perspective, Arabic and English are two languages that present different stylistic features. In Arabic, verbal sentences are more recurrent than nominal sentences and are written in the following order: Verb-Subject-Object, with the possibility of omitting the subject, or changing the word order to stress a certain element. While English is believed to use T-units (main clauses) that are more complex, Arabic tends to rely on coordinated T-units “as a stylistic character of its prose writing style” (Obeidat 5). Many linguistic features thus differentiate Arabic from other languages. However, the issue of cultural differences remains an important hindrance to the transfer of meaning when translating from Arabic. In fact, cultural differences constitute the main reason behind what is known as a lexical gap or “the absence of a hypothetical word which would seem to fit naturally into the pattern exhibited by existing words” (Trask 157). A lexical gap, also known as *lacuna*, is especially prevalent in religious and scientific texts and gives rise to untranslatability (Obeidat). Since Arabic literature often comprises intertextual allusions to religious texts and culture-specific terms and concepts, untranslatability can be a challenge for the translator seeking to translate Arabic literary texts into another language.

When the literary text in question is Arabic poetry, many are the challenges that face the translator. In addition to their aesthetic dimension, Arabic poems can also be of religious or philosophical nature, which brings us back to the issue of untranslatability. Classical Arabic poetry, that is the poetry written before the *Nahḍa* period, was written in vertical lines consisting of two parts each and was characterized by its complex structure and vocabulary. On the other hand, *Mahjar* poetry, classified as modern poetry, differs greatly from its predecessor in form and content. In fact, *Mahjar* poets often used several metres and verse forms within the same poem, which allows a bigger margin for experimentation on the part of translators.

Translating Naimy’s Poetry

Hams al-jufūn (Eyelid Whispersings) was published in Beirut in 1943 and contains thirty poems written in Arabic and published in America between 1917 and 1928, as well as fourteen prose translations of poems originally written in English. After reading Naimy’s collection, I selected three poems, which I felt reflected the author’s style and register very well. Naimy, like other *Mahjar* poets, is known for his Tolstoian spiritualization of nature. In each of the three poems chosen for translation, the elements of nature are depicted in a way that suits the author’s inner thoughts and emotions.

In “Close Your Eyes and You Shall See,” “clouds” and “snow” are used as an allegory for the hardships of life, while, in contrast, “stars” and “meadows” are used as a symbol of beauty, guidance, and fertility. For this reason, in the English translation, I added some parts in the case of “stars to guide you” and the adjectives “grey” to “clouds” and “green” to “meadows” to make explicit the image that the author wants to paint. In fact, clouds could symbolize purity or divine mystery in certain cultures, whereas the verb used in Arabic, *talabbada*, is in the reflexive form *tafa‘ala*, suggesting intensity and heaviness due to the doubled letter ‘*ayn*. Overall, I opted for a communicative translation. With the purpose of achieving a translation that could pass off as an original and that would feel less wordy or foreign to the target reader, I replaced what would otherwise be literally rendered as “behind

the clouds” with “therebehind” and “under the snow” with “thereunder.” The repetition of words in Arabic is a rhetorical device called *tikrār*. While *tikrār* (repetition) and *’itnāb* (redundancy) are two rhetorical devices used deliberately in Arabic to the advantage of the meaning, they could feel redundant when used in another language. At the level of tone, I tried to find equivalents in English to vehiculate the philosophical message of the poem in a form that would feel familiar to the reader. I also managed to recreate the same scheme of rhymes in English (AABBCCDD), albeit with imperfect rhymes.

Nature in the second poem “My Brother” is represented as a desolate place where the corpses of those left for dead are scattered where once stood crops. The third line of the third stanza depicts how nature (in the form of drought) and man (in the form of war foes) leave farmers with barren lands. The poem is written in a defeated tone, suggesting great distress and complete loss of hope. As far as the conditional sentences are concerned, I chose to repeat the conjunction “if” where in Arabic the two conditional clauses were joined by the particle of conjunction *wāw*. I also added “then” before introducing the main clauses in English in order to make the progression of thoughts slightly clearer to the reader and to stress the conditional. In fact, the particularity of this poem lies in the use of the conditional that creates a sense of us-versus-them, highlighting social inequalities and dichotomizing the winning vs. the losing parties, the hungry and destitute farmers vs. the acclaimed war veterans, and so on. At the lexical level, I had recourse to compensation in the translation of the word *khullān* from the singular *khalīl*, which refers to a loyal and trustworthy friend. In order to fill the lexical gap, I added the adjective “loyal” to the word “friend,” which, on its own, fails to convey the nuances of the original. At the recurrence of the word, I opted for “confidants,” both to achieve an imperfect rhyme with the word “homeland” and to avoid redundancy. At the level of tone, I tried to convey the author’s pessimism in the third stanza by opting for the verb “rebuild” instead of “build” and added the time conjunction “once” to the verb “ruined.” Like in the first poem, I tried to find equivalents in English that would convey the air of despondency that is prevalent in the original. I avoided repeating the same word in different lines of the same stanza, with the exception of the fourth stanza, which was the most difficult to translate. Ultimately, I chose to reformulate the original and kept the repetition of “to come to pass” and “to befall,” which breaks the pattern of avoiding *tikrār* (repetition) in translation.

In the third selected poem “Who Are You, Myself?”, the author addresses himself in search for a demystifying answer as to the nature of his being. In the original, it is clear that the poem is addressed to the author’s self since Arabic is a gendered language, meaning that, unlike English, verb, noun, and adjectives are either masculine or feminine. The word *naḥsī* (myself) is a feminine word, which is why it is clear that the verbs in the main clauses of the conditional sentences in the original refer to it, since their conjugation is altered accordingly. In order to avoid ambiguity in English, I added “Myself,” in the beginning as a way to make explicit the addressee of the poem. Unlike the first poem where the conditional is hypothetical, in this poem, I opted for the use of “when” to render the certainty of the particle of condition *’in*, which introduces observations made by the author with regard to himself. At the lexical level, I tried to diversify the terms referring to the same natural element (wave/tide, sea/ocean, tune/melody) to avoid the production of a redundant text in English. The poem contains a religious allusion in the fourth stanza. The expression used in Arabic literally means “as a prophet upon whom inspiration fell down from above.” The word *wahī* used in Arabic refers to divine inspiration. To make the translation more accessible to foreign readers while keeping a foreign sense to it, I chose to translate it as “like a prophet upon whom revelation descended,” thereby substituting “inspiration” with “revelation,” and producing a hybrid translation that captures both cultures; the Arab with the verb “descend,” typically used to describe the descent of the Holy Quran, and the Western with the word “revelation,” which is typically used to refer

to divine communication. The original poem is written in free-verse form, and the scheme of rhymes was uneven in my translation. This poem is a good example of the underdone of Naimy's poetry, in that it reflects an inner conflict between idealistic and rational aspirations. In the seventh and final stanza, the author's personal quest ends with the realization that the self is, in the true spirit of the Sufi Oneness of Being, part of an interconnected ecosystem that is created by "an invisible hand." The logical reasoning of the poet culminates in a spiritual answer to his questions, exuding a sense of calm and peace in the final stanza and putting his inner dilemma to bed. The author concludes by addressing his self, in a lucid and triumphant tone, to proclaim: "You are wind and breeze. You are waves, you are sea. You are lightning, you are thunder, you are night, you are dawn. You are an overflow from a divinity!" I opted to mimic the original poem by not adding the article "the" to the elements listed by the author, in order to replicate the staccato effect produced in the original through the unconventional listing of nouns without linking them with the conjunction *wāw*. I also believe this could render the sense of glorification of the self, which is created in the original through use of indefinite nouns in the *nakira* form.

Almost one century later, the poems found in Naimy's *Hams al-jufūn* (Eyelid Whispers) still hold an enriching and insightful literary significance. Translating the three selected poems was a very pleasant experience, and I hope it can offer readers insight on the *Mahjar* literary tendencies and an overview of some of the issues involved when translating from Arabic. *Mahjar* literature, which is characterized by its position at a crossroads between East and West, constitutes a unique literary school that deserves more attention from Arab, diasporic, and foreign audiences alike. This type of hybrid literature remains of utmost importance in a time where xenophobia and cultural imperialism are on the rise. It can also serve as an example for translators seeking to produce translations in which, rather than competing with one another, identities can coexist in harmony.

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Selected poems by Mikhail Naimy

Selected poems by Mikhail Naimy

Translated by Guitta Njeim

أغمض عينيك تبصر

إذا سماؤك يوماً ... تحجبت بالغيوم
أغمض جفونك تبصر ... خلف الغيوم نجوم
والأرض حولك إما ... توشحت بالثلوج
أغمض جفونك تبصر ... تحت الثلوج مروج
وإن بليت بداء ... وقيل داء عياء
أغمض جفونك تبصر في الداء كل الدواء
وعندما الموت يدنو ... واللحد يفغر فاه
أغمض جفونك تبصر ... في اللحد مهد الحياة

Close Your Eyes and You Shall See

If one day grey clouds fill the sky above you
Close your eyelids, and you shall see
therebehind stars to guide you
And if the earth under your feet is clothed
with snows
Close your eyelids, and you shall see
thereunder green meadows
If you are afflicted with an ailment, one said
to be incurable for sure
Close your eyelids, and you shall see in the
ailment the remedy and the cure
And when death rears its head, and the grave
opens its mouth to swallow you whole
Close your eyelids, and you shall see, in the
grave, the cradle of your soul

أخي

أخي، إن ضجَّ بعدَ الحربِ غربيُّ بأعماله
وقدَّسَ ذكراً من ماتوا وعظَّم بطشَ أبطاله
فلا تهزجْ لمن سادوا، ولا تشمتْ بمن دانا
بل اركعْ صامتاً مثلي بقلبٍ خاشعٍ دام
لنبيكي حظَّ موتانا

*

أخي، إن عادَ بعدَ الحربِ جنديٌّ لأوطانه
وألقي جسمه المنهوك في أحضان جلائئه،
فلا تطلبْ إذا ما عُدتْ للأوطانِ خلانا
لأنَّ الجوعَ لم يتركْ لنا صحباً نناجيهم

My Brother

My brother, if after the war, a Westerner
boasted his deeds before his fellows,
If he revered the mention of those who died
and exalted the cruelty of his heroes,
Then chant not for the victors and rejoice
not at the misfortune of the losers,
But rather bow down in silence, like me,
with a heart that is bleeding and feeble
So that we can lament the fate of our dead
people

*

My brother, if after the war, a soldier
returned to his homeland,
If he rested his worn body in the arms of his
loyal friends,
Then ask not, if you return to the homeland,
for confidants
For hunger has left us no friends to talk to
Save for the ghosts of our dead people

سوى أشباح موتانا

*

*

أخي، إن عادَ يحرث أرضَهُ الفلَّاحُ أو يزرَعُ

ويبني بعد طولِ الهجرِ كوحًا هدَّه المدفع

فقد جفَّتْ سواقينا وهَدَّ الذُّلُّ مأوانا

ولم يتركْ لنا الأعداءُ غرسًا في أراضينا

سوى أجياف موتانا

*

أخي، قد تَمَّ ما لو لم نشأه نحن ما تَمَّا

وقد عمَّ البلاءُ، ولو أردنا نحن ما عمَّا

فلا تندبْ، فأذُنُ الغيرِ لا تُصغي لشكوانا

بل اتبعني لنحفرَ خندقًا بالرفشِ والمعولِ

نوارِي فيه موتانا

*

أخي، مَنْ نحن؟ لا وطنٌ ولا أهلٌ ولا جارُ

إذا نمنا، إذا قمنا، ردانا الخزي والعارُ

لقد حَمَّتْ بنا الدنيا كما حَمَّتْ بموتانا.

فهات الرفشَ واتبعني لنحفرَ خندقًا آخرَ

نوارِي فيه أحيانا...

مَنْ أَنْتِ يَا نَفْسِي؟

إن رأيتَ البحرَ يطغى الموجُ فيه ويثورُ،

أو سمعتَ البحرَ يبكي عند أقدامِ الصخورِ،

My brother, if the farmer returns to
ploughing or cultivating his land,
If after a long exile, he rebuilds a shack once
ruined by the ordnance,

Then our streamlets have run dry and
humiliation has defiled our homes
And foes have left us no plants growing in
our soil

Save for the corpses of our dead people

*

My brother, it has come to pass, and not
without our consent has it come to pass
Distress has befallen us, and had we wished
for the contrary, it would have never
befallen us

Therefore, wail not, for the ears of others do
not listen to our grievances

But rather, follow me and let us dig a trench
with our pick and shovel

In which we can burry our dead people

*

My brother, who are we? No homeland, no
relatives, and no neighbours
Whether asleep or awake, disgrace and
shame are the garments covering our figures
Life has marred us as it has marred our dead
people

Therefore, hand me the shovel and follow
me

So that we may dig another trench
In which we can burry our living people

Who Are You, Myself?

Myself,

When you see the turbulent ocean with its
angry waves, rising

ترقبني الموج إلى أن يحبس الموج هديره
وتتاجي البحر حتى يسمع البحر زفيره
راجعاً منك إليه.

هل من الأمواج جئت؟

*

إن سمعت الرعد يدوي بين طبّات الغمام
أو رأيت البرق يفري سيفه جيش الظلام،
ترصدي البرق إلى أن تخطف منه لظاه،
ويكف الرعد لكن تاركاً فيك صداه.

هل من البرق انفصلت؟

أم مع الرعد انحدرت؟

*

إن رأيت الريح تذري الثلج عن روس الجبال،
أو سمعت الريح تعوي في الدجى بين التلال،

تسكن الريح وتبقي باشتياق صاغية

وأناديك ولكن أنت عني قاصيه

في محيط لا أراه.

هل من الريح وُلدت؟

*

إن رأيت الفجر يمشي خلسةً بين النجوم

ويؤشّي جبة الليل المولي بالرسوم،

يسمع الفجر ابتهالاً صاعداً منك إليه

وتخزي كنبّي هبط الوحي عليه

بخشوع جائيّه.

هل من الفجر انبثقت؟

*

Or hear the sea at the feet of the rocks,
wailing,
You watch the waves till the tides mute their
murmuring
And you call upon the sea till it hears its
own exhaling
From you to it, returning.
Is it from the tides that you have come?

*

When you hear the thunder, between the
layered clouds, echoing
Or see the sword of lightning ripping
through the pitch darkness,
You observe the lightning till you rob it of
its flame brightly burning,
And the thunder ceases, leaving, however,
its echo within you.
Did you part from the lightning?
Or is it with the thunder that you have come
down?

*

When you see the wind scattering the snow
from the mountaintops
Or hear the wind in the dead of night,
between the hills, howling,
The wind abates while you wait, longing,
listening
And I call you, but you are distant from me
In an ocean I do not see.
Is it from the wind that you were born?

*

When you see the dawn, between the stars,
stealthily walking
Adorning the cape of the night that is
leaving,
The dawn hears a plea from you to it,
ascending
And you bow your knees like a prophet
upon whom revelation descended, kneeling.
Is it from the dawn that you have emerged?

*

إن رأيت الشمسَ في حوضِ المياه الزاخرة
ترمق الأرضَ وما فيها بعينٍ ساحره،
تهجع الشمسُ وقلبي يشتهي لو تهجعتُ،
وتنام الأرضُ لكن أنت يقظى ترقبين
مضجعَ الشمسِ البعيدِ.
هل من الشمسِ هبطتِ؟

*

إن سمعتِ البُلبُلَ الصّدَاحَ بين الياسمينِ
يسكب الألحانَ نارًا في قلوبِ العاشقينِ،
تلتظي حزنًا وشوقًا، والهوى عنك بعيدُ
فاخبريني، هل غنا البلبُلِ في الليل يُعيدُ
ذكَرَ ماضيكِ إليكِ؟
هل من الألحانِ أنتِ؟

*

ايه يا نفسي! أنتِ لحنٌ فيَّ قد رنَّ صداه
وقَعَّتْكَ يَدُ فَتَانِ خَفِيِّ لا أراه.
أنتِ ريحٌ ونسيمٌ، أنتِ موجٌ، أنتِ بحرٌ،
أنتِ برقٌ، أنتِ رعدٌ، أنتِ ليلٌ، أنتِ فجرٌ
أنتِ فيضٌ من إله!

When you see the sun in the bosom of the
water that is abounding,
Glaring at the Earth and all that which it
contains, with eyes that are bewildering,
The sun retires and my heart desires your
retiring,
The Earth slumbers, but you are awake,
observing
The sun's distant place of resting.
Is it from the sun that you have descended?

*

When you hear the songbird chirping
between the jasmine flowers
Pouring tunes in the hearts of lovers,
Setting them ablaze, while you, distant from
Love, are burning with the fire of sadness
and longing
Tell me, does the singing of the songbird in
the night retribute the remembrance of your
past to you?
Is it from tunes that you are made?

*

O myself! You are a melody within me,
echoing,
Signed by the hand of an invisible artist I do
not see.
You are wind and breeze
You are waves, you are sea
You are lightning, you are thunder, you are
night, you are dawn
You are an overflow from a divinity!