

Novelist highlights the dangers in translating Arabic

Ahdaf Soueif Speaking at AUC on the Art of Translating Culture.

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A large audience gathered at the American University in Cairo on October 17 to hear Ahdaf Soueif, a renowned novelist and the author of *Map of Love*, share her thoughts on the act of translating culture.

The talk, part of the AUC Department of English and Comparative Literature's annual public lecture series, was both timely and appropriate. Many recent public cultural and intellectual events around the world have been overshadowed by the attacks of September 11, but this topic is relevant to the underlying causes of the attacks.

Soueif's insights were a welcome breath of fresh air as she dissected the complicated issues related to cross-cultural communication.

While the U.S. government and its main military ally, Britain, argue that their war on terrorism is not against Islam, the reality is that in the rush to place blame for the carnage in New York and Washington, many westerners have revived old misconceptions of Islam and the Arab world to feed their fears and anxieties.

Within this context, Soueif opened her talk with a small personal disclaimer: she said that "the particular circumstances illicit a more hard-line position" than normal. This hardening of her arguments is directly related to the style of media coverage and political discourse dominating Western countries.

The 'racial profiling' of terrorist suspects and the false fusion of Islam with extremist violence are two of the problematic trends that Soueif referred to.

Soueif agrees with Edward Said's theory of orientalism, which holds that, fundamentally, the antagonism between West and East is not just based on an accidental misunderstanding of culture but is the fruit of past colonial intentions and historical conflicts dating back to the crusades.

Placed within this historical framework, Soueif said, "I don't think it is possible to view the act of selecting, translating and publishing a work as simply a literary act. I think it has to be viewed as both an act of culture and of political significance – an act which takes place in a particular context."

For people who "stand on the bridge between East and West" she cautions that "we need to remind ourselves again that the general Western consciousness of the Arabs has on the whole been formed first in the perceived antagonism between Western Christianity and Islam and later as a view of the Arab as an object of study."

This 'study' was then used manipulatively "either towards occupying the land or gaining control of the resources," she said.

She did emphasize, however, that there were many "honorable exceptions of people who have engaged in genuine culture exchange."

So while Soueif believes that, "translation can be the means by which cultures cross-fertilize each other," she feels that it is important to recognize the potentially problematic implications involved when translating 'culture'.

Soueif made a distinction between translating literature and scientific texts. The benefits of translating medical, astronomy and engineering manuals are fairly straightforward, but when it comes to fiction and other literary works the authors' intentions must be clarified.

Speaking from experience, Soueif focused on the translation of the Arabic novel into English, "We can say that the function of a translation of an Arabic novel into English is to facilitate a cross-cultural encounter of a high degree of intimacy between an English reader and an Arabic novel or story." Translating Arabic novels provides an opportunity for Western readers to empathize and gain a greater degree of insight into 'Arab characters' than a tourist could simply by traveling through the region.

But Soueif argues that the opposite can occur should the translation be faulty or done without the inside cultural context. The result, rather than build understanding, could reinforce antagonistic perceptions.

"The profound cultural ignorance" found in the Western media over the last month makes this argument all the more striking. She pointed towards the translation of suicide notes from the September 11 attacks. According to Soueif's analysis, the translation was filled with inaccuracies and misinterpretations. The need for accurate translation could never be greater than in this circumstance.

Likewise, translating what the Egyptian pilot, Gamal Al Batouti, said as the EgyptAir Boeing 767 plunged into the Atlantic last year, was crucial to understanding what really happened in the plane's cockpit.

One of the primary problems, according to Soueif, is in the use of the word "God" in Christianity and Islam. In the West people are brought up not to use the Lord's name 'in vain', while the Arabic language is peppered with sayings and references which include the word "Allah". These often do not have the same connotations as in English.

Soueif gave the example of the word wallahi. The direct translation is: "Do you swear by God that it is true," but the literal translation is simply, "Really!" The implication is that in direct translations the actual meaning may lead Western readers to associate simple idioms with religious zeal.

By providing some other humorous examples of actual translations, Soueif hammered home her argument that without an understanding of the actual intentions of specific words the translation of Arabic novels into English may leave the readers with a wrong perception of Arabic culture.

"Basically you are translating not words, nor information. You are translating an entire culture, and that is crucially important," she said.

She ended with the following thought: "Translation is the intersection between cultures. Where should one navigate more carefully than at an intersection?"