



SPECIAL FEATURE

Elias Khoury, The Novelist

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Elias Khoury, who is prominent worldwide as a public intellectual, was born in Beirut in 1948. After studying Sociology and History at the Lebanese University, Beirut, and the University of Paris, he became a journalist and literary critic. He worked as assistant editor and then managing editor of *Shu'oun Filastinia* (Palestinian Affairs). Since 1975 he has published fourteen novels. He also served on the editorial board of the iconic literary magazines *Mawaqif* – with Adonis – and *Al-Karmel* with Mahmoud Darwish. Later he became editor of the cultural pages of *As-Safir* newspaper, and then editor of “Mulhaq”, *An-Nahar*'s weekly literary supplement. In addition to his novels, Elias Khoury has published four books of literary criticism, three plays, two screenplays, and a collection of short stories. He has had a distinguished academic career as a visiting professor at both Columbia and New York Universities and at the Lebanese American University, as Global Distinguished Professor of Middle Eastern and Arabic Studies at the University of New York, also teaching at the Lebanese University and the American University of Beirut. His novel *Gate of the Sun* won the Palestine Prize, and its translation was named Best Book of the Year by *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and a Notable Book by *The New York Times*.



YEHOUDA SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI

Swapping Geographies, Mixing Languages:
The Hebrew-Speaking
Universe of Khoury's
Palestinian Novels

Elias Khoury is possibly the most prominent of modern Arab authors who, within the Arab world, plays a major role in the tradition of the post-Mahfouzian novel, as Edward Said has once coined it. In this essay, I turn the spotlight on an additional layer of his creative writing which, hitherto, has been absent from discussions of his oeuvre. Khoury essentially invented a unique literary space-time continuum in which languages mix along spatial and temporal planes – a universe best observed in the Hebrew translation of his Palestinian novels.

Khoury has published fourteen novels to date; five of which I have had the privilege of translating to Hebrew; three novels in the context of the Lebanese Civil War: *White Masks* (1981), *The Journey of Little Gandhi* (1989), and *Majma' al-Asrar* (1994, *Complex of Secrets*); and two in the context of the Palestinian Nakba: *Children of the Ghetto 1, My Name is Adam* (2016) and *Stella Maris (Children of the Ghetto 2: Najmat al-Bahr*, 2019, Beirut). Albeit artificial, the distinction between the Lebanese and Palestinian novels is pivotal to restoring Khoury's unique fictional universe in this essay.

In the Lebanese novels, Khoury holds a broken mirror to a society's face on the verge of collapse. Typically, he recounts the

horrors of the civil war via stories from the peripheries recalling mangled bodies, streets in ruin, and endless bloodshed in battle-worn Beirut. In his Palestinian novels, Khoury shifts his attention to Palestine and again, uses fragmented stories and memories of the Nakba, whether it be 1948, or the still-ongoing cycle of violence. His narratives are based on the stories of random individuals with firsthand experience of the horrors, or ones who have heard those harrowing accounts. The narration is anchored in repetition, as if the narrator needed it as reiterated proof of the inconceivable or were unable to tell a coherent story.¹ Indeed, Khoury believes that the writer is a key witness to their era; a position evident in all his novels.

That said, there is a crucial difference between the Lebanese and Palestinian novels. In the former, Khoury writes about his own society whilst in the latter, he delves into an ostensibly foreign space. For the translator, this holds every bit as true – only in reverse. In the Lebanese texts, the narrative is typically set in a very much alien world into which the Hebrew translator must dive, immersing themselves in the culture, historical context, geography, and various local dialects. In the Palestinian novels, the story takes place in the Hebrew translator's native geography, culture and sometimes, even own language as the narratives are often anchored in Hebrew literature and culture, including whole portions in Hebrew. This inverse scenario creates a universe far less noticeable when these novels are translated to other languages. In such a universe, Khoury is not only an author but also a translator from Hebrew or, imagined Hebrew to Arabic. In his writing, he employs a variety of experimental literary devices, styles and narrative forms that present a head-on challenge to Derrida's concerns about writing and translation.

In *Des tours de Babel*, Derrida acknowledges the limits of conventional translation theory that deals with transitions between two languages, while failing to employ language simultaneity. How to write, and translate a text that mixes several languages, and how to render the effect of plurality?

«Comment traduire un texte écrit en plusieurs langues à la fois? Comment «rendre» l'effet de pluralité? Et si l'on traduit par plusieurs langues à la fois, appellera-t-on cela traduire?»²

Derrida also urges the readers to vocally engage in the prospect

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of one writing about language in general, and about the language of translation in particular:

«On ne devrait jamais passer sous silence la question de la langue dans laquelle se pose la question de la langue et se traduit un discours sur la traduction.»³

Using Khoury's latest novel, *Stella Maris*, I show how he tackles these very concerns. The novel presents a simultaneous plurality of languages, showcasing literary techniques that challenge the limitations of language while exploring a unique discourse on translation. This particular Hebrew translation further stands out seeing as how I had translated the novels whilst in Haifa, where the majority of chapters are set. This offers a unique and otherwise rare reading and translation journey, certainly when one is translating Khoury's Lebanese novels into Hebrew. It places the author within the Israeli sphere and like an anthropologist, he translates the fictional experiences and stories that allegedly take place in Hebrew for his Arab-speaking readers. As Khoury's writing simulates a translation, one wonders: how are we to treat a translation of a translation?

Stella Maris follows on from *My Name is Adam*, the first volume of the trilogy *Children of the Ghetto*. Each is made up of multiple layers of space and time, entwined with the history and biography of Adam



l to r: Hebrew editions of *White Masks*, *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, and *Complex of Secrets*

Dannoun. *My Name is Adam* tackles Adam's early childhood and autumn years; however, it omits the main chunk of his biography. *Stella Maris*, meanwhile, is Adam's coming-of-age story which seeks to fill in that blank. The story, for the most part, is set in 1960s Haifa, featuring scenes of Haifa life, exposing all forms of trickery employed in Haifa-themed literature, and chronicling the interplay of identities of a young Palestinian living in the Jewish state.

The Mixing of Languages

If the text is to realize its full potential, it must free itself from the vice of monoglot readers who cement the language barrier. It must deal with the dynamic between the two languages simultaneously as opposed to separately. This simultaneity challenges the ideology of a so-called language hierarchy. Defying the notion of diglossia, Khoury mixes (literary and spoken) languages, producing a script that is a blend of both without ever decidedly committing to either. Khoury highlights the fluid nature of language in his polyglot writing:

“The moment you enter a language, you enter with your other language. Languages are open, and in any language, there are layers of another language. When I speak Arabic, when I think in Arabic, using the Lebanese or Palestinian dialect, I discover that I am also speaking Aramaic.”⁴

Adam, the protagonist is also a polyglot who regularly mixes languages:

“She told me that that my speech had been slurred and that I'd talked without stopping and would jump from one subject to another, beginning in English, then switching into Arabic or into a mixture of Arabic and Hebrew, and drinking a lot of water.”⁵

Khoury's Arabic text occasionally has a transliteration of spoken Hebrew. In one instance, Rabah, the guard at Benjamin Garden, turns to Adam in Hebrew and asks him if he is a Jew: “Atta Yehudim?” In another chapter, Adam tells Rivka in Hebrew that he loves her: “Ani Ohev Otach”.⁷ Similar examples occur in *My Name is Adam* when a soldier yells at Palestinians who are trying to approach the Ghetto fence: “Tahzor le-ahor! Asur!” meaning, “Step back, it's forbidden”.⁸

Khoury all the while must provide interpretation to his non-Hebrew-speaking Arab readership. Here is one typical technique from *My Name is Adam*:

He pointed, laughing, at the people huddled together at the corner of the square and said in Hebrew, “*Khavasim, kmo khavasim!*”

“What’s he saying?” Manal asked the doctor, who was standing next to her.

“He’s just jabbering in Hebrew,” Dr Samara said.

“He’s saying we’re like sheep,” said Mufid Shahada, who’d learned Hebrew from working at the nearby Ben Shemen colony.⁹

When speaking Hebrew, the author occasionally uses Arabic rather than Hebrew idioms, highlighting the many differences between the two. For example, when a soldier says, “*Assa batachtonim!*” (“He peed his underpants,”) in Hebrew the phrase reads, “went in his pants.” (“*Assa bamikhnasayim!*”). Is this a mere hiccup or rather, a more conscious choice? In the English translation, Humphrey Davies settled this by simply opting for “He’s pissed himself!”¹⁰

Khoury writes through translation and therefore, the translation to Hebrew presents a fascinating role reversal where the original approximates the site of the translation.

The Language of Language

The idiosyncrasies of Khoury’s works are heightened by his deep foray into language. The intense preoccupation with language and even more so, language’s language (meta-language) paves a long-winded road littered with linguistic, semantic and discursive hurdles that make Hebrew-reading of the Palestinian novels all the more challenging. Every so often, Khoury will turn to meta-linguistic chapters that demarcate how words, grammar and syntax all fall short of signification and therefore, require additional literary illustration.

In *Stella Maris*, the chapter, “The Lovers of Haifa” features an alternate world to A.B. Yehoshua’s *The Lover*. In a carnivalesque manner, Khoury inverts signs, representations and names, flipping them on their heads in a polyphonic game of timelines and roles. Palestinian worker, Naim, who can recite Israel’s poet laureate, Bialik’s *In the City of Slaughter*, becomes Adam who is studying Hebrew Literature;



l to r: Hebrew editions of My Name is Adam and Stella Maris

Adam who owns the Jewish-run garage turns into Gabriel, whilst Gabriel himself who owns the vintage Morris car becomes Hebrew author Menachem Zecharia who is at the garage looking for an Arab informant so that he could start work on his novel. In this literary exercise, Khoury not only reconceives *The Lover's* garage scene but, in his play on timelines, is also ahead of the narrating time, relocating the scene to the early 1960s when Yehoshua was writing *Facing the Forests* where for the first time the Palestinian's muteness is put into words with stark coherence.

Here, the mute character in *Stella Maris* takes Hebrew literature to task quite corporeally, for describing his tongue as having been 'cut out':

"No! No!" the mute man cried out, shaking his head right and left as he stuck out a long tongue in evidence that no man had in fact severed his tongue.¹¹

Khoury repeatedly reflects on local colonial reality, and on the ideological and power implications of its linguistic hierarchy. By that time, Arabic had gradually been erased from the public sphere and less than 2% of Israeli Jews could read or converse in Arabic. The colonial hierarchy that emerged in Israel/Palestine assumes an artificial diglossia between the languages whereby Hebrew is assigned as major and Arabic, minor. In the following example, Hebrew functions as the

primary language of the state, thus putting Palestinians at a disadvantage; a reality which culminated in the fatal shooting of an elderly Palestinian man. Supposedly inspired by true events in the village of Sa‘sa‘, a Jewish soldier pointed his weapon at an old Palestinian man who was asking, “Eish hadha?”. The Jewish soldier then answered, “Hadha esh!” and shot him. These expressions, though phonetically similar, illustrate the so-called French faux-ami, meaning fake friends. The storyteller explains the source of this bilingual collision:

“Son of a bitch. Fire, ‘esh’ in Hebrew, is shooting. The poor man asked “Eish”, ‘what’, and they cut him off with fire. This bitch played with the words and the blood”.¹²

Discourse about Translation

Khoury also makes sure to reverse the hierarchy, creating translation chapters in which Arabic is the major language and Hebrew, the minor one. For instance, when Adam professes his love for Rivka, he quotes a love poem by the Arab poet Al-Hallaj: “lam yazidni al-ward ila ‘atashan”.¹³ Adam struggles to translate the line and when failing to find an appropriate Hebrew equivalent, he resolves to abandon the poem’s translation altogether and consequently, also his Hebrew readers’ prospects of ever understanding it. Should the translator then have translated the poem to Hebrew after all, or were they right to have left it in its Arabic version, as unintelligible to the monoglot readers as it was to Rivka? Here, I opted to leave the poem in its Arabic version transliterated into Hebrew without any translation, whilst acknowledging this choice with a note in the text.

Later, Adam lists to his girlfriend, Dalia, twenty dictionary synonyms for the word “love” – Hawa, mahabba, sababa, huyam, shawq, etc. These are in fact the result of a translative act within language itself. An attempt to endow each of these words with meaning via the dictionary results in a semantic “dictionary loop” where there is no overlap between the words in either language. As the words also do not follow any form of hierarchy in Hebrew or Arabic, or within their own respective language even, the translation task is rendered all the more difficult. There is no way of breaking this cyclical pat-

tern without taking some arbitrary decision, seeing as every choice leads to a simultaneous excess and lack. One's only remaining option is to therefore transliterate the Arabic words into Hebrew, and to decide on the go what their Hebrew markers would be.

“He translated to Dalia the twenty scenarios through which love passes, as described by the Arabs; however, he remained unsure as to the exact meaning of the words, for translating words of love to other languages is not possible, as love itself defies translation. He therefore decided arbitrarily whether the ‘sababa’ is the portal into the ‘huyam,’ and whether the ‘huyam’ is the peak of love, or if it is in fact the other way around.”¹⁴

Ultimately, this multi-layered linguistic universe is embedded in the very art of translation and mandates a re-examination of one's loyalties to the national habitus and its lexicons, for the number of Hebrew synonyms for love at the translator's disposal pales in comparison to their Arabic equivalents. These semiotic and semantic collisions at times do result in a translation impasse that can only be resolved by addressing monoglot readers in one version and one language only.

To sum up, Khoury's linguistic universe undercuts conventional writing and translation for monoglot readers. This is because his writing is already a form of translation (real or imagined,) thereby making translations of his work a translation of translation. The reality of this will stump monoglot readers who expect a fluent, localized text articulated in a single, coherent and familiar language. In doing so, Khoury not only discusses the language that writing and translation are conducted in but also raises the prospect of bilingualism and, ultimately, proposes a political model of bi-nationalism in the space between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean.

Notes:

¹ Elias Khoury. (Arabic) *Lost Memory: Critical Studies*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1982. pp72-76.

² Jacques Derrida, “Des tours de Babel,” in Joseph F. Graham (ed.), *Difference in Translation*, Cornell University Press, 1987 (Appendix, p.215).

³ *ibid.*, p.209.

⁴ Raef Zreik, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, and Yehouda Shenhav-Shahrabani, “Dialogue with Elias Khoury on literature and translation”, *Journal of Levantine Studies*, Vol. 9 (1), 2019: 29.

⁵ *Children of the Ghetto 1: My Name is Adam*, English version, p.99, trans: Humphrey Davies.

⁶ *Awlad al-Ghetto 2: Najmat al-Bahr*, 2019, Beirut, p.48. ⁷ *ibid.* p.140.

⁸ *Children of the Ghetto 1: My Name is Adam*, English version, p. 245, trans: Humphrey Davies.

⁹ *ibid.* p.203. ¹⁰ *ibid.* p.204.

¹¹ *Awlad al-Ghetto 2: Najmat al-Bahr*, 2019, Beirut, p.102.

¹² *ibid.* p.328. ¹³ *ibid.* p.128. ¹⁴ *ibid.* p.429.