

Translating Miri's Ayam al 'asal wa al junoun (Days of Honey and Madness): Challenges and Strategies

By

Dr. Mahmoud Ibrahim Radwan (translator)⁽¹⁾

Abstract

In translating Mirī's *Days of Honey and Madness* (2000) from Arabic into English, I felt as if I was designing my way out of an enigma. The most pressing challenge has to do with the reception of the text since it is a translation of fragmented stories recounted through the perception of a mad man located amidst deranged human beings. Moreover, the narrator, taken for a lunatic and a psychopath, is at the same time a rational philosopher, and what seems like rumination emanating from an unstable state of mind is intermingled with deep philosophical deliberations. Furthermore, what called for new and unconventional strategies in translation is the experimental style of the text, with its abrupt flashbacks, constant shifts in time and place, repetitive gaps and lapses, unfinished and disconnected sentences, dense prose and cross-generic writing, recurrent use of terms and expressions stemming from Iraqi dialect.

(1) Assistant Professor of English Literature, Department of Foreign Languages (English Section), Faculty of Education, Tanta University, Egypt

ترجمة أيام العسل والجنون : تحديات وإستراتيجيات

مترجم

د. محمود إبراهيم إبراهيم رضوان

الملخص

هناك الكثير من التحديات في ترجمة رواية أيام العسل والجنون (2000) للكاتب العراقي خضير ميري. من أهم تلك التحديات هو كيفية تلقي القارئ نصًا مترجمًا يروي حكاياته شخص مجنون/ مريض نفسيًا، وبطريقة غير منطقية أو تسلسلية. ومن الجدير بالذكر أن هذا الراوي هو الفيلسوف العاقل وسط أقرانه من المجانين ويعد اجتراره الذي يتسم بالعتّه بمثابة تأملات فلسفية. ومن بين التحديات الأخرى أسلوب النص الذي اتسم بالتجريبية؛ لذا بدت هناك حاجة ملحة لاستخدام إستراتيجيات غير نمطية في ترجمة هذا النص. ومن سمات هذا الأسلوب: الاسترجاع والاستحضار المفاجئ لأحداث ماضية، الجمل الهشة غير المكتملة، تماهي الحدود بين الأجناس الأدبية، استخدام المصطلحات والتعبيرات الغريبة والمتداولة في اللهجة العراقية.

Khudayr Miri is a contemporary Iraqi writer whose main writings convey the need for locating subjectivity in fictional and non-fictional representation of madness. Miri's *Days of Honey and Madness* is a very unique work. The text is 59 pages which makes it more of a novella than a full length novel. In his intention to divulge the struggle for an individual narrative of madness, he seeks to deconstruct systems taken for granted and to disrupt the depiction of madness in the official discourse. The time frame on which Miri focuses covers the First Gulf War of US bombing of Iraq in 1990-91 after Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. The narrative is presented through the perspective of an inmate in an asylum for the insane situated just outside of Bagdad. For an American or British reader the text offers a Faulknerian insight into the horrors of war.

Ayam al 'asal wa al junoun (*Days of Honey and Madness*) (2000) crystallizes a surreal state of being in which madness is associated with honey. Miri himself emerges as the implied author and the reliable narrator, as well as an actual patient who feigned madness in order to take refuge in an asylum to save himself the brutality of imprisonment; a punishment incurred by the Iraqi dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein for his dissident opinions. The experience in al-Rashad Asylum enables Miri to scrutinize and excavate the ghoulish

setting and the cruel machinery of a world absented, ignored and marginalized by society. His vivid portrayal and minute details give voice to the inmates/patients constricted within stifling walls.

In translating Miri's *Days of Honey and Madness* from Arabic into English, I encountered a number of challenges. The most pressing concern in the process of translating it had to do with the reception of the text being a translation of fragmented and disjointed stories recounted through the consciousness of a mad man located amidst deranged human beings and seeking to report on the derelict condition of the asylum and its residents. Moreover, the narrator, taken for a lunatic and a psychopath, is at the same time the rational savant, and what seems like rumination emanating from an unhinged state of mind is interspersed with philosophical deliberations. In approaching this text, what I considered to be the main arduous task is to render dexterously this duality of consciousness without burdening the reader and to convey the meanderings of a raving mind without leading the reader astray. The experimental style, with its dense prose and cross-genre writing called for new and unconventional strategies in translation.

When perusing Miri's *Days of Honey and Madness* with the intention of translating it, I felt as if I was designing

my way out of a conundrum. I was in persistent pursuit of modes of expression that incite in the reader the desire to partake in the narrator's unfamiliar perception of the surrounding. Significantly, the illogic of madness which permeates the narrated space saved the writer the task of indulging in extensive accounts on the inhuman policies of the Iraqi government and the equally savage US led invasion and its indiscriminate strikes of Iraqi civilians; hence, contesting the assumption that the text is a documentation of firsthand experience.

More often than not, the narrative structure elicits in the reader of the Arabic text confusion. The reader's sensibilities are unsettled with the abrupt flashbacks, the repetitive lapses and the unfinished and ungrammatical sentences that disregard the conventions of word order, but can be understood as the mechanism of reverting to thoughts that belong to the recent past. In the English translation, I had to change the verb tenses in order to recreate a similar effect. *Days of Honey and Madness* is a novel where space and time are re-configured through the language and a narrative mode very specific to the textual experience. The reader is jolted at a swift and unpredictable rate between different spatial and temporal zones. This is plainly illustrated in the shifts to and fro 'Amiriyah Orphanage and al Rashad Asylum. Significantly, amid his description of the attack of the American drones bombing Iraq in 1991, Mirī transposes the reader in time to the event of his signing a report entitled "Khudayr Mirī, Baghdad 1988."

The recurrent use of terms and expressions that pertain specifically to

the Iraqi dialect and are indigenous to the region necessitated a thorough and extensive investigation on my part. In many instance, I delved into the connotation, nuances and implications of the terminologies as well as the multiple levels of meaning in order for me to arrive at the most appropriate English equivalent that communicates the intended sense in the Arabic text. Dishes and culinary items from the Iraqi cuisine recur and demanded some description on my part, which I provided in a glossary appended to the translated text. For 'Dolma,' I indicated the reference to an Iraqi dish that is made from hollow eggplants, zucchinis, potatoes and bell peppers stuffed with a mixture that combines minced lamb meat, garlic, onion, rice, cumin and black pepper. 'Thlagat al boodah' is the term of the ice cream refrigerator. The latter has a particular significance since the narrator compares it to the morgue: both are used to preserve by freezing.