

# Arabic Huck: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn in Vernacular Arabic

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This article focuses on the first translation of Mark Twain's 1884 masterpiece, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, into vernacular Arabic and reflects briefly on a few translations of the novel into Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic.<sup>1</sup> My translation into vernacular Arabic, which is the first of its type in the Arab world, is an independent project I am currently undertaking. Titled *Arabic Huck: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn in Vernacular Arabic* (hereafter *Arabic Huck*), it chooses to exclusively employ a colloquial regional dialect spoken in Damascus and the countryside surrounding the Syrian capital.<sup>2</sup> All previous Arabic translations of Twain's novel, which started to appear in 1958 in Egypt, used Modern Standard Arabic (hereafter MSA) and Classical (Quranic) Arabic. The latter versions of Arabic can be used interchangeably nowadays despite slight and occasionally major differences between them in terms of syntax, spelling, punctuation, and pronunciation. While Classical Arabic originated from medieval dialects of Arabic tribes and was used in writing the Quran, MSA is the most widely used version of Arabic today. MSA is consistently used in all media outlets and publications and understood by all speakers and readers in Arabic-speaking countries.<sup>3</sup>

## **Rationale and Inspiration behind *Arabic Huck***

My decision to undertake the first translation of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (hereafter *Huckleberry Finn*) into vernacular Arabic has been a difficult and daunting one. This decision was profoundly inspired by my interest in and doctoral research on Samuel Clemens's life and the greatest literary works he produced under the pseudonym "Mark Twain."<sup>4</sup> It has not been easy to select a specific vernacular regional dialect of Arabic and use it instead of the clearer and more widely spread MSA. I have constantly found myself confronted with a long, tiring, and doubt-ridden process regarding the selection and consistent, faultless transcription of a single vernacular

regional dialect of Arabic. Moreover, the candidate dialect should appeal to and be comprehended by the largest number of Arabic readers in twenty-two Arab countries. This is particularly challenging because each Arab country speaks a uniquely accented Arabic and hosts a variety of colloquial regional dialects that are deemed almost impenetrable and incomprehensible by Arabs in other Arabic-speaking countries. My effort to present *Huckleberry Finn* in vernacular Arabic, which to my knowledge has no precedent, has so far seen the first four chapters of Twain's novel completely translated.

As mentioned, *Arabic Huck* has been prompted by my constant attention to the latest research contributions to and findings in Twain scholarship. These include the discovery of the first half of the working manuscript of *Huckleberry Finn* in 1990 and the publication of Clemens's autobiography in three installments between 2010 and 2015.<sup>5</sup> In fact, *Arabic Huck* is intended to pay homage to Twain's final authorial decision to vernacularize the voice of his young narrator, Huck Finn, in his 1884 masterpiece. Twain's bold and original decision is highlighted and illustrated by Victor Doyno in his "Textual Addendum" to the 1996 Bloomsbury edition of the novel.<sup>6</sup> The first half of the working manuscript of *Huckleberry Finn*—which was lost in 1885—shows that Twain consciously used formal English at the beginning of the seven-year composition process, following the publication of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in 1876.<sup>7</sup> However, he eventually dropped formal English and adopted a number of vernacular regional dialects spoken by white and Black Americans in the Mississippi Valley in the 1830s and 40s. In the manuscript version, Twain makes a significant change on the first page of Chapter 1 by dropping Huck's formal "You will not know about me," trying out the less stodgy "You do not know about me," and finally settling on the colloquial "You don't know about me." In the printed text, he adds, "but that ain't no matter." The latter statement emphasizes Huck's casual tone and invites potential readers and book buyers not to worry about not having read the first part of the set, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, toward the end of his long, intermittent composition of *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain resolved to give the role of narration to a 14-year-old boy and endow him with a candid colloquial voice. He also decided to have Huck band together with Jim in running away from the oppression of white and African slavery in the Old South. In doing so, the author implies and communicates through his young protagonist a growing sense of rebellion against social, educational, and religious institutions in the slaveholding South. Vernacularizing Huck's voice could well be seen as the culmination of the gradual transition from the formal voice and gentlemanly manners and actions of the authorial narrator to the vernacular voice and rowdy actions of Southern frontiersmen in the sketches and tall tales of frontier humor. This transition can be traced chronologically through the writings of the following major frontier humorists: Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, William Tappan Thompson, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, Johnson Jones Hooper, Joseph Glover Baldwin, and George Washington Harris. It is worth noting that Twain's early sketches, mainly "The Dandy Frightening the

Squatter” (1852) and “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” (1865), have their roots in the school of frontier humor.<sup>9</sup>

It is then Twain’s decision to vernacularize Huck Finn’s voice that has inspired me to do the same and embark on this ambitious albeit challenging and potentially controversial translation project. I started out by setting myself the goal of identifying a vernacular Arabic dialect that has crossed national borders and become popular and easily understood by Arabs in other Arab-speaking countries. After rounds of brainstorming and reflecting on the media outlets and status quo in the Arab world, I decided to adopt the above-mentioned vernacular Damascene dialect in my endeavor of bringing Twain’s novel to Arab readers in a manner that employed choices of language and diction closer to those made by Twain himself. Selecting this specific regional dialect has been motivated by the fact that it is one of the clearest and easiest to understand and one of the most widely spread across the Arab world. The popularity and accessibility of this dialect are mainly attributed to the impressive success that Syrian drama has earned in all twenty-two Arab countries over the past three decades. Arabic satellite TV channels always compete to purchase the exclusive rights of airing Syrian drama series in order to attract the highest number of viewers all year round, mainly during the holy month of Ramadan (the fasting month in the Islamic Calendar). This success of Syrian drama has been coupled with the rapid spread of numerous Turkish TV drama series in most Arabic-speaking countries, initially dubbed in a vernacular Syrian dialect similar to the one used in *Arabic Huck*.

It is worth pointing out that public awareness and appreciation of Mark Twain in the modern Arab world have been influenced and enriched by a successful 1980 Japanese cartoon production of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, titled *Tomu Sōyā no Bōken*.<sup>10</sup> The Japanese animation TV series was very popular on Arabic TV channels in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and the Gulf countries in the 1980s and 1990s. I remember watching it several times in my childhood as it was aired every two to three years in Syria by the Syrian State Television between 1985 to 2000. The series was titled “مغامرات توم سوير” in Arabic and dubbed in MSA entirely.

My selection of the vernacular Damascene dialect in translating *Huckleberry Finn* into Arabic makes a strong case for attempting a translation that does not exclusively use MSA. Arab writers, translators, and readers generally feel compelled to use and preserve MSA in their written and visual production and communication. In fact, there have always been many Arab readers who strongly oppose and instantly attack all attempts to translate international literary and nonliterary publications into vernacular Arabic. Employing and preserving Classical Arabic or MSA is indeed a given in the Arab world. This expectation has significantly affected me at the beginning of my project in the sense that I was initially doubtful about pursuing this translation project and worried about how it would eventually be received by the general public and academic circles. The situation is particularly difficult, and potentially embarrassing for me personally because I am a university professor. Professors and teachers in the Arab world are expected to act as role models and confine themselves to the sole use

and championship of MSA. After months of painful consideration, my heart eventually won this battle against my mind and I consequently decided to proceed with my project. Nevertheless, I still expect that once completed and accepted for publication, *Arabic Huck* may face a predictably harsh reception from a small group of potential readers and book buyers. In other words, my published translation may not be entirely exempt from the negative comments that the majority of translations into vernacular Arabic have received in Arabic-speaking countries. Nevertheless, I have already overcome this internal conflict and drawn motivation and confidence from the fact that my translation project is artistic and original in scope and nature and has a clear purpose and vision inspired by Twain's absorbing creative design.

### **Previous Arabic Translations of *Huckleberry Finn***

As has been indicated, MSA and Classical Arabic were the versions of Arabic adopted in all previous Arabic translations of *Huckleberry Finn*. The first translation that appeared in the Arab world was conducted by Mahir Nassim and revised by Farid Abdulrahman in Egypt in 1958.<sup>11</sup> To my knowledge, Nassim has been the only other Arab translator who entertained the thought of translating Twain's novel into vernacular Arabic, possibly through a regional Egyptian dialect. However, Nassim changed his mind at the very beginning of his project and ended up using MSA, with the occasional deployment of Classical Arabic. In Nassim's "Introduction" to his own translation, he and Farid Abdulrahman highlighted and explained the reasons that prompted them to consider and then quickly drop the use of vernacular Arabic:

Since Mark Twain was keen to write this story in the "vernacular" dialect, not in formal English, it was our intention at first to translate the novel in "vernacular" Arabic as well so as not to lose anything of its splendor, but we changed our minds so as not to degrade its literary level. We have eventually resolved to use a version of formal Arabic that is simple and easy, neither pedantic nor colloquial.<sup>12</sup>

"ولما كان "مارك توين" قد حرص على أن يكتب هذه القصة باللغة "الدارجة"  
لا الفصحى، فقد قام بذهننا في بادئ الأمر أن ننقلها باللغة العربية "الدارجة"  
أيضا حتى لا تفقد شيء من روعتها، ولكننا عدلنا عن ذلك حتى لا نهبط  
بمستواها الأدبي، وأن كنا قد تعمدنا أن تكون اللغة الفصحى التي نقلنا بها  
القصة إلى العربية سهلة بسيطة لا هي بالمتحذقة ولا هي بالعامية!!" (نسيم  
٧-٨)

This significant passage reveals Nassim's underlying perception that the use of vernacular Arabic in translating Twain's novel would be more logical, authentic, and faithful to Twain's novel than using MSA. This is because vernacular Arabic would preserve and reflect the "splendor" of this masterpiece and do it literary justice. However, the passage simultaneously and paradoxically voices the translators' fear

and ambivalence that a translation into vernacular Arabic would “degrade the literary level” of Twain’s book. Nassim appears to be divided between conflicting impulses. He was probably worried that a translation into vernacular Arabic might affect the public reception—and commercial marketability—of his translation in Egypt and other Arabic-speaking countries. This is the same sense of fear and hesitance that took hold of me at the beginning of my translation project, *Arabic Huck*.

Despite presenting the same number of chapters (forty-three) as in the original, Nassim’s translation of *Huckleberry Finn* displays numerous deliberate additions, omissions, and adaptations that target the themes, narration, characters, and significant events in the plotline. The translator imposed such alterations in order to make the book appealing to the Egyptian regime and culturally, religiously, and politically amenable to the society of the 1950s and 1960s. In a 2016 dissertation titled “*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn [sic] in Arabic Translations: A Case Study*,” Mariam Abdulmalik examines Nassim’s translation along with two others conducted in Egypt by Shawqi Alameer in 1992 and Nasr Abdulrahman in 2015.<sup>13</sup> Abdulmalik correctly places and contextualizes Nassim’s translation within the positive cultural and educational change witnessed across Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser’s successful leadership of the Egyptian Revolution in 1952 and his subsequent presidency (1956–1970). This positive change aimed at raising the consciousness and morality of the general public, following the establishment of the Higher Council for Arts and Letters in 1956 and the Ministry of Culture in 1958. Egypt witnessed the “golden age of literary translation” in this period after launching “The Thousand Books Project,” which translated important international literary, scientific, and humanities and arts books into Classical Arabic and MSA between 1955 and 1967.<sup>14</sup> Nassim’s translation of *Huckleberry Finn* was listed in this project as literary work no. 185. However, translators in this period, including Nassim, could not exercise total freedom in undertaking their work. The political regime imposed strict censorship and developed a system of institutions, mainly the Arabic Language Academy, to “control and mobilize the intellectuals,” as Richard Jacquemond discusses in his 2008 book *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt*.<sup>15</sup> Jacquemond adds that “This system is organized around a sort of law of decreasing freedom, which states that the greater the audience that can be reached by the means of distribution chosen, the greater is the censorship.”<sup>16</sup> This high level of state censorship made Nassim’s translation inaccurate on many occasions and in various ways.

Most of the changes imposed by Nassim then were to satisfy the expectations of the regime and to attract and educate the general public. Indeed, state censorship during Nasser’s presidency forced Nassim to not only omit all ideas that had religious, political, or cultural meanings and implications, but also to occasionally improvise by adding content that did not exist in the source text. For example, Nassim chose to completely omit the statement “Sick Arab—but harmless when not out of his head” from his translation. This is the sign that the duke writes and places on Jim when he disguises the fugitive enslaved in Chapter 24. Moreover, when Huck asks Miss Watson

to try to pray instead of him in Chapter 3, the young narrator says, “but she said I was a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn’t make it out no way.”<sup>17</sup> Nassim added to this sentence “until I grew up and became aware of the value and significance of praying that Miss Watson could not explain to me at that time, and how foolish I was when I was young.”<sup>18</sup> This addition by Nassim, as Abdulmalik has commented, drastically changes Huck’s characterization and contradicts the essence and flow of his narration, as Huck is 14 years old when he tells the story in Twain’s novel. In other words, Nassim’s translation presents Twain’s book as a memoir featuring a much older, wiser, and more religious Huck reflecting on his foolish childhood.<sup>19</sup> Nassim also heavily censored Tom Sawyer’s formation of his band of robbers since boys’ adventures are perceived as social and political threats to regimes in some Middle Eastern countries. In Twain’s novel, Huck reflects on Tom Sawyer’s band of robbers, whose mission, as Tom explains, was “only robbery and murder.”<sup>20</sup> Nassim changed this paragraph almost entirely, using the following:

“group of adventurers” and “Tom Sawyer’s group”<sup>21</sup>  
instead of

Twain’s “band of robbers” and “Tom Sawyer’s Gang”<sup>22</sup>

“We chase thieves and highwaymen”<sup>23</sup>  
instead of

“We are highwaymen”<sup>24</sup>

“We confiscate all stolen [money and cattle] from them [criminals] and give them back to their owners, either by the help of the police or by surprising them, and we won’t be involved in rape because we are not rapists and don’t like to hurt anybody. But if it is proven that those outlaws of society include murderers and thugs, then we help the police arrest them and stop them from hurting people”<sup>25</sup>

instead of

“We stop stages and carriages on the road, with masks on, and kill the people and take their watches and money.”<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, Nassim’s heavy-handed modifications affect the majority of Twain’s literary devices, even at such climactic moments when Huck decides in Chapter 31 to renounce his religion in order to continue helping Jim in his pursuit of freedom. Twain has Huck reflect on religion, slavery, and wickedness while tearing up the letter he drafted to inform Miss Watson about the whereabouts of Jim, who is attempting to escape slavery:

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hands. I was a trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

"All right, then, I'll go to hell"—and tore it up.

It was awful thoughts, and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head; and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter, I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog.

Then I set to thinking over how to get at it, and turned over considerable many ways in my mind; and at last fixed up a plan that suited me.<sup>27</sup>

In translating this climactic passage, Nassim deliberately removed all references Huck makes to religion and wickedness. This resulted in a shorter, incomplete passage that obliterates altogether Twain's themes and authorial intention and renders this significant moment in the plotline far from being climactic:

"كان موقفا محرجا، فالتقطت الورقة وظللت ممسكا بها في يدي وأنا أرتعش ... كنت مضطرا الى أن اختار - والى الأبد - بين أمرين ... وكنت أعرف سلفا القرار الذي سأأخذه، ولكنني مضيت أفكار وأنا أحبس أنفاسي، ثم لم ألبث أن قلت لنفسي:

- لن أبعث بالرسالة!! ... لن يعود "جيم" رقيقا كما كان!! ثم مزقت الورقة.

وأخذت أفكار في وسيلة أحرر بها "جيم" المسكين ... وطافت بذهني أفكار كثيرة. وأخيرا استطعت أن أرسم خطة ثلاثيني." (نسيم ٢٨٦-٢٨٧)

Nassim's censored passage can be translated as follows:

It was an embarrassing situation, so I picked up the paper and held it in my hand while trembling ... I was obliged to choose—and forever—between two things ... and I already knew the decision that I would make, but I kept thinking while holding my breath. Then I quickly said to myself:

I will not send the letter! ... Jim will never be a slave as he was! Then I tore off the paper.

And I began to think of a way to free poor Jim, and many thoughts were roaming in my mind. Finally, I was able to come up with a plan that suited me.<sup>28</sup>

Like Nassim's translation, all Arabic translations of *Huckleberry Finn* to date have adopted MSA. Most of these translations also underwent heavy-handed, distorting processes of abridging, adaptation, or censorship throughout the task of bringing the text to Arab readers. This is partly because their translators wanted to reach the highest number of book buyers and readers across the Arab world. However, their completed translations did not do Twain and his masterpiece literary justice, as they were considerably affected by an assortment of cultural, religious, and political factors dominating and taking hold of Arab societies at the time of writing and publication. Such significant factors forced said translators to consciously shorten, adapt, or even completely delete specific passages or chapters. Not only that, those translators did not completely take into consideration or even briefly explain Twain's employment of different vernacular regional dialects and numerous literary devices, let alone his constant focus on Southern and African American life and motifs. Consequently, those Arabic translators partially failed to capture and present the intrinsic allure and freshness of the book as well as its absorbing narrative style and powerful characterization. Examples include translations undertaken in Egypt by Alameer in 1992 and Kawthar Mahmoud Mohammad in 2012.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to Nassim's translation, Abdulmalik examined two other Arabic translations of *Huckleberry Finn* produced in Egypt, conducted by Alameer in 1992 and by Abdulrahman in 2015.<sup>30</sup> She highlights that the 1990s saw the publication of various translations of *Huckleberry Finn* in Egypt and all these translations were "abridged, truncated, and transformed."<sup>31</sup> This is because the translations were targeted at children, youths, and the family as a whole. This approach in translation significantly influenced the structures and contents of literary translations in this period, including those of *Huckleberry Finn*. In fact, this era witnessed the publication of several translations of Twain's novel in MSA as a small, pocket-sized children's story of a boy and an enslaved fugitive accompanying him. These abridged translations included pictures and short sentences or paragraphs, and dismissed all religious and political details. The goal behind this high level of abridging and censorship was again to satisfy the cultural and political norms of the day and make the book more engaging to children and their families.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the decreed freedom of press at the start of Hosni Mubarak's presidency in 1981, the year 1990 came to witness the beginning of "an extreme overhaul and transformation of the Egyptian intellectual arena" as a state response to "fight against Islamist terrorism" on the eve of the second Gulf War.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the state, under the sponsorship of the president's wife, Suzanne Mubarak, in 1993 began publishing hundreds of books at very low prices through the "Reading for All Program." This program also established the "Family Library" series (Maktabat al-usra), whose goal was to give Egyptian families access to as many "enlightened works of modern written culture" as possible.<sup>34</sup> The year 1995 also marked the foundation of the National Translation Project of the Higher Council for Culture. According to Jacquemond, this project announced the completion of one thousand translations, but

its impact in literary translation was weak. This literary boom of the 1990s clearly suffered from inconsistency and a lack of official organization. The political regime developed policies to use intellectuals as instruments and mouthpieces for state purposes, mainly encouraging them to “support ‘enlightened’ thoughts and creativity [al-tanwir] and to combat the ‘darkness’ [al-zalam] of extremism and terrorism.”<sup>35</sup>

Unlike Nassim’s and Alameer’s translations, Nasr Abdulrahman’s 2015 translation of *Huckleberry Finn* avoided almost all elements of abridging, adaptation, and censorship, according to Abdulmalik. This drastic change in approaching and conducting translation in Egypt was motivated by the Arab Spring and the consequent political spirit that has dominated Egypt after the Revolution in 2011. Egyptians have become able to demand and exercise freedom of speech and accept worldly views and ideas that were previously deemed “taboo” in Egyptian culture and politics. Abdulmalik points out that this significant change has manifested itself in Abdulrahman’s translation as well as in other writing and translation projects undertaken since 2011. An established writer and translator, Abdulrahman was prompted to translate *Huckleberry Finn* when he read Nassim’s 1958 translation, which he deemed good generally but incomplete. In his preface to his translation, Abdulrahman attributes the numerous omissions made by Nassim to the moral, cultural, religious, and political censorship exercised at the time as well as the difficulty encountered in determining the meaning of certain vernacular words, phrases, and expressions used by Twain. Abdulrahman makes it clear that he managed to find the meanings of these challenging colloquial expressions by consulting online sources and advanced dictionaries. Such helpful resources were not available to Nassim and other translators in the 1950s, which partly explains the loss and numerous changes that impacted a significant part of the themes, literary devices, and messages that Twain voices explicitly and implicitly. Abdulrahman, who uses MSA throughout his translation, adds in his preface that he was entirely unbiased, since he did not change or censor any idea even when Twain’s ideas contradicted the translator’s own cultural, religious, or political views.<sup>36</sup>

### **Dealing with Translation Challenges Encountered in Arabic Huck**

Unlike all previous Arabic translations of *Huckleberry Finn*, my translation project, *Arabic Huck*, aims to be the first complete translation that authentically captures the freshness of Huck’s casual voice, childish tone, and cluttered storytelling, along with the seriousness of Twain’s authorial intention and comedy. My objective as a translator is to fully and accurately comprehend and transmit Twain’s literary elements and rhetorical devices to readers in all Arabic-speaking countries, without imposing any alteration or exercising any level of censorship prompted by social, religious, or political motives. I am planning on translating *Huckleberry Finn* in its entirety, producing cultural equivalents in vernacular Arabic that would consequently enable Arab readers to understand and enjoy Twain’s implicit and subtle social, historical, and political

messages and nuances of meaning. This is particularly challenging and demanding because the process requires rounds of brainstorming, identifying the closest cultural equivalents in the vernacular Damascene dialect, reading sections out loud, and constant editing that results from fresh readings and peer reviews of completed sections and chapters.

I have also faced the mental challenge of how my translation will be received publicly and academically once completed and accepted for publication. I was initially worried about receiving mixed responses and immediately negative remarks about my translation and my role as a translator who has consciously favored a vernacular dialect at the expense of the more revered and widely spread MSA. Such a literary endeavor is not habitual for a university professor in the Arab world. To rid myself of this gripping fear and discouraging sense of ambivalence, I decided to follow in Twain's footsteps and produce a prefatory piece in my translation that can explain, in MSA, my motives for undertaking such a translation in vernacular Arabic rather than MSA. By including this prefatory piece, which I have titled "Notice from the Translator," I am trying to convince my readers that my translation is worth reading and that my employment of a vernacular dialect—to use Twain's words in his "Explanatory"—has not been done in a "hap-hazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly."<sup>37</sup> Twain writes in formal English on one occasion only in his novel, when penning his significant "Notice" and "Explanatory." Similarly, I use MSA on one occasion only in *Arabic Huck*, when sharing a "Notice from the Translator" at the beginning of my translation. In doing so, I have found an opportunity to highlight the inspiration drawn from Twain and make a strong case for choosing and using the vernacular Damascene dialect instead of MSA:

#### **Notice from the Translator**

The following Arabic translation of Mark Twain's 1884 masterpiece *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is the first in the Arab world to employ a vernacular regional dialect throughout the entire translation process. The translator adopts a Syrian colloquial dialect spoken in Damascus and its countryside. Choosing this specific dialect instead of Classical or Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) has been a cautious and difficult decision inspired by a few major factors. These include literary authenticity and the aim to preserve and reflect Twain's narrative design and authorial purpose, which changed throughout the seven-year process of composition. Twain eventually decided to abandon the use of formal English and employ several vernacular regional dialects spoken by whites and Black Americans in the Mississippi Valley during the 1830s and 1840s. The translation presented in *Arabic Huck* pays homage to Twain's decision and is therefore unprecedented in the Arab world.<sup>38</sup>

## ملاحظة من المترجم

تم اعتماد لهجة سورية عامية متداولة في منطقة دمشق وريفها في ترجمة هذه الرواية التي يعتبرها الكثيرون رائعة مارك توين والأدب الأمريكي. كان اختيار المترجم لل لهجة عامية وتفضيلها على العربية الفصحى أو المعاصرة في عملية الترجمة مبنياً على عدة عوامل أساسية أهمها توخي الدقة الأدبية ومحاولة الحفاظ على الغاية المنشودة للكاتب توين الذي قرر في هذا الكتاب التخلي عن استخدام الإنجليزية الفصحى وتوظيف عدة لهجات عامية متداولة من قبل البيض والعبيد السود في القرى المنتشرة حول نهر الميسيسيبي خلال الثلاثينيات والأربعينيات من القرن التاسع عشر (١٨٣٠-١٨٥٠). الترجمة المقدمة في هذا الكتاب هي الأولى من نوعها في الوطن العربي.

Until recently, I thought that the only change I would enforce in my translation would be the constant use of the phrase “Black slave” in Arabic, “عبد أسود” (pronounced “abd aswad”), to replace the N-word and all other racial slurs used freely by Twain in his novel. I strongly believed that the change would be necessary for a few reasons. My initial perception was that my use of the N-word in Arabic, زُنْجِي (pronounced “zandji”), would probably offend modern readers, fan the flames of the global controversy surrounding the inclusion and pedagogical use of Twain’s masterpiece at schools, colleges, and libraries, and obscure Twain’s humane and empathetic attitudes towards African Americans socially and racially. After all, it was Twain’s free use of the N-word—which was part of his artistic plan and aim for total verisimilitude—that has caused the frequent censorship and banning of *Huckleberry Finn* since it was first published. However, after reading a detailed research study conducted by Arbia Naimi and Ayda Knan on the etymology and uses of the N-word in Arabic (زُنْجِي zandji),<sup>39</sup> I changed my mind completely and resolved to use the word زُنْجِي instead of the phrase “Black slave” (عبد أسود abd aswad). Naimi and Knan, who consulted the “al-Zandjī” entry in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* online,<sup>40</sup> persuasively argued that (زُنْجِي zandji) appears in Arabic literature but does not appear to be of an Arab origin. The lexicon is rather a designation of peoples of Black Africa. The two researchers also concluded that it is difficult to find a derogatory meaning and negative perception in the lexicon “zandji” in Arabic but that this is not the case with the N-word in English and Twain’s masterpiece.<sup>41</sup> This has convinced me to drop the use of “Black slave” (عبد أسود abd aswad) from my translation and adopt (زُنْجِي zandji) when mentioning Jim, and the plural (زونج zonouj) when mentioning enslaved African Americans. It is worth indicating that Nassim’s translation consistently refers to Jim as (زنجي zandji) or (خادم) (Miss Watson’s servant). He also uses the plural (زونج zonouj) in all references to enslaved African Americans.<sup>42</sup>

It is also worth highlighting that my earlier decision to use the phrase “Black slave” in Arabic, “عبد أسود”, when indicating Jim and other African Americans in my translation was inspired by reading Abdulmalik’s dissertation, in which she correctly reflects on how the term “slave” has historically been defined in the Arab world:

Slavery is a less sensitive issue to Arab readers since it is not a color-oriented matter as in the United States. Slave, in Arabic, refers to Armenian, Asian, African and any non-Muslim who is captured during war. Therefore, this theme did not change in the novel but target readers [Arabs] did not receive a clear understanding of the notion. Translators did not provide any explanation to clarify it for them.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, slavery has never been defined or determined by means of skin color in the Arab world and history. I was not completely aware of this fact and sociohistorical difference between the Arabic and American cultures before I started my translation project. This is why I initially thought the phrase “Black slave” in Arabic “عبد أسود” would be more appropriate for my project. The phrase includes a color designation and can reduce the seriousness and controversy that have resulted from Twain’s frequent, unrestricted use of the N-word.

Besides the difficulty of dealing with the N-word and other racial slurs, *Arabic Huck* has also faced a major challenge in maintaining consistency and avoiding errors in rendering the selected vernacular Arabic dialect on the written page. This is particularly demanding because the Arabic language is a tonal, inflectional, and gender-conscious language that contains numerous synonyms for almost every single word, glottal stops, and strong sounds that do not exist in other world languages. I have managed to overcome this challenge by developing an ever-expanding table that lists the adopted shape and spelling of any word that is likely to appear differently if used again in the translation. For example, the word “that” in the following statement by Huck can be translated “أنه” in MSA but it can be pronounced and written “أنو” in the vernacular Damascene dialect:

“I was in a sweat to find out all about [Moses]; but by and by [Widow Douglass] let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn’t care no more about him, because I don’t take no stock in dead people.”<sup>44</sup>

*Arabic Huck* translates Huck’s statement above as follows:<sup>45</sup>

“أنا تحمست كثير لأعرف كل شي عن موسى لحتى قالت الأرملة بعدها أنو موسى مات من زمان. بردت دمي لأنو ما بحب أهتم بعالم ميتة.”

I have so far finished translating the first four chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*. At the beginning of my project in late 2017, I contemplated getting a book deal with a publishing house in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, or the United Arab Emirates. However, I quickly decided to put this prospect on hold after I was encouraged by a librarian and bookshop owner in Dubai to finish translating Twain’s novel in its entirety before attempting to contact publishers. This is because publishers usually require the whole

manuscript before they can make a decision on a translation. In early 2018, I briefly shared the translation of the first chapter in *Arabic Huck* on a temporary Facebook page I created and closed shortly afterwards. The page received numerous visits, positive, encouraging comments, and requests for continuation from family and friends in Syria and all over the world. This indeed gave me the confidence to pilot my project academically by sharing selected passages from the completed four chapters in *Arabic Huck* with readers, students, and academic members of staff at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) in the United Arab Emirates. This happened during my appointment there as a visiting professor in the Department of English, College of Arts and Sciences between 2018 and 2019. The project instantly earned the attention and recognition of numerous students and professors from different Arab countries and appealed to other academic staff who do not speak Arabic but teach literature, linguistics, and other social sciences. My translation project is now listed as a “High-Impact Project” on AUS’s main research webpage, following its adoption in a staff research committee and several undergraduate composition and communication courses in the Department of English. In 2019, it was included in a research plan for a projected Center for Cultures in Contact to be housed in the same department.

In order to demonstrate how *Arabic Huck* differs from previous Arabic translations of Twain’s masterpiece, the opening passage of *Huckleberry Finn* provides a good starting point. Huck starts his narrative by saying:

You don’t know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; but that ain’t no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly — Tom’s Aunt Polly, she is — and Mary, and the Widow Douglas is all told about in that book, which is mostly a true book, with some stretchers, as I said before.<sup>46</sup>

In an abridged translation of *Huckleberry Finn* published in Egypt in 2012, Kawthar Mahmoud Mohammad produces nineteen chapters out of a possible forty-three.<sup>47</sup> These chapters are not the first nineteen chapters in Twain’s novel, for the translator excessively truncates passages, combines paragraphs and chapters, and exclusively employs MSA throughout her translation. She presents the introductory paragraph of Twain’s novel as follows:

لن تعرفوني إلا إن كنتم قد قرأتم كتاباً بعنوان مغامرات توم سوير، لكن لا بهم، فهذا الكتاب كتبه السيد مارك توين وهو رجل يقول الحقيقة — في أغلب الأحوال — لكنه غالى في بعض الأمور، غير أن هذا ليس بالشأن المهم، فلم ألق شخصاً لم يكذب في وقت من الأوقات عدا الأرملة أو الخالة بولي، وبهذا أقصد عمه توم،

التي تدعى بولي، هي والأرملة دوجلاس سيكونان في هذا الكتاب الذي تشكل الحقيقة الجزء الأكبر منه كما قلت من قبل.

If this translated passage is read for the first time by an Arab reader who has no previous knowledge of Twain and his masterpiece, the reader would instantly think of Huck Finn as a mature and highly educated person. This is because MSA, as presented by Mohammad in this passage, is highly rhetorical, pedantic, and demanding and cannot be spontaneously and effortlessly produced by a 14-year-old Arab child. In fact, MSA is never used by Arab children or even Arab adults as a means of normal day-to-day communication nowadays. Mastering MSA requires finishing high school education and sometimes pursuing college specialization in Arabic. Therefore, unlike the translations produced by Mohammad, Nassim, Alameer, and Abdulrahman, *Arabic Huck* uses a vernacular dialect of Arabic in an attempt to authentically capture Huck's casual voice, childish tone, and cluttered storytelling. The ultimate goal is to present Twain's book to Arab readers as a unique, absorbing, and unprecedented reading experience. The introductory passage in *Arabic Huck* reads as follows:

ما بتعرفوني إلا إذا كنتو قرأتوا كتاب عنوانه مغامرات توم سوير، بس ما في مشكلة بكل الأحوال. هداك الكتاب كتبو السيد مارك توين وحكى فيه الصدق، يعني تقريبا. ما يهكم. ما شفت حدا إلا وسحب بالكذب، سواء كان العممة بولي أو الأرملة أو حتى ماري. العممة بولي - عممة توم - وماري والأرملة دوغلاس كلهم انحكى عنهم بهداك الكتاب اللي هوي كتاب أغلبو صح بس في بعض السحبات مثل ما قلتكم قبل.<sup>48</sup>

To conclude, translating *Huckleberry Finn* faithfully and accurately into Arabic, or any other language, demands that the translator be fairly familiar with Twain's biography as well as the social, cultural, political, and literary history of the United States in the nineteenth century. This translation task cannot be properly accomplished without having a general idea of Clemens's childhood in Hannibal, the numerous professions and endeavors in which he engaged before he eventually embarked on writing, and the ways in which his national and international travels significantly shaped his intriguing personality and social and political views. Such views—which espoused modernity and opposed backwardness and slavery—often found implicit and indirect expression in his masterpiece and other literary works. However, Twain's humane and progressive views found explicit and direct expression in his posthumously published *Autobiography* (2010–2015). This explains why translators selecting *Huckleberry Finn* should be equipped with the tools of literary historians who are ready and determined to produce Twain's work perceptively and objectively, without exercising any abridging, adaptation, or censorship.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Mark Twain, 1884, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, introd. Justin Kaplan; foreword and addendum by Victor Doyno (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).
- <sup>2</sup> Hamada Kassam, *Arabic Huck: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn in Vernacular Arabic*, manuscript in progress.
- <sup>3</sup> Arab Academy, “Quranic Arabic vs. Modern Standard Arabic,” from <https://www.arabacademy.com/quranic-arabic-vs-modern-standard-arabic/#:-:text=The%20difference%20between%20MSA%20and,MSA%20is%20more%20common%20spoken.&text=If%20one%20wants%20to%20learn,would%20be%20a%20great%20fit>.
- <sup>4</sup> In my doctoral research, which was conducted at the University of Essex in the UK, I focused on how Twain’s composition of his greatest works was inspired and influenced by the antebellum American literary school of Southwestern humor (aka frontier humor, backwoods humor, or vernacular realism). This school flourished in the literature of the United States for almost four decades before the Civil War (1825–1865). Its practitioners, the humorists, used vernacular regional dialects in their sketches and consequently inspired and paved the way for Twain and regional writers (local colorists) in the 19th century. The humorists were also predecessors to other significant authors who dominated the American literary scene in the twentieth century, including Erskine Caldwell, Cormac McCarthy, Harry Crews, William Faulkner, and Eudora Welty.
- <sup>5</sup> Mark Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, 3 vols., ed. Harriet Elinor Smith, and Benjamin Griffin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010–2015).
- <sup>6</sup> Victor Doyno, “Textual Addendum” to Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. London: Bloomsbury, 1996, 365–418.
- <sup>7</sup> Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Hartford: The American Publishing Company, 1876.
- <sup>8</sup> Doyno, “Textual Addendum” to *Huckleberry Finn*, 389.
- <sup>9</sup> S. L. C. [Mark Twain], “The Dandy Frightening the Squatter,” *The Carpet-Bag*, May 1, 1852; and Mark Twain, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches* (New York: C. H. Webb, 1867). The total dominance of the vernacular voice and anarchic actions of the East Tennessee mountaineer Sut Lovingood in George Washington Harris’s Sut Lovingood sketches (1854–1867) arguably paved the way and inspired Twain to vernacularize Huck’s voice (George Washington Harris, *Sut Lovingood: Yarns Spun by a “Nat’ral Born Durn’d Fool.”* [New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, c1867]). This speculative reading was proposed and supported textually, biographically and anecdotally in another article I published in *Mark Twain Journal* in

2016. The article, which is titled “Huck Finn as the Fictive Son of George W. Harris’s Sut Lovingood,” contends that pap Finn is Sut Lovingood himself. It highlights and demonstrates that Twain was conscious of Harris and his Sut Lovingood sketches and built on an interesting fictive father-son conflict that was creatively sparked in the works of Johnson Jones Hooper and Joseph Glover Baldwin (see Hamada Kassam, “Huck Finn as the Fictive Son of George W. Harris’s Sut Lovingood,” *Mark Twain Journal* 54, no. 1 [2016]: 125–39). The latter writers were two Whig frontier humorists who respectively created Captain Simon Suggs and Simon Suggs Jr., two of the most memorable and notorious con artists in Southwestern humor. The two tricksters outsmart each other at cards before the son eventually wins his freedom and his father’s horse and consequently leaves westward with the receding frontier in search of greener pastures. Twain might have had this in mind when he drew his young protagonist and reignited the interesting father-son conflict in Southwestern humor between Huck and his father, pap Finn. Another possible influence on Twain’s decision to vernacularize Huck’s voice is Major Joseph Jones, the colloquial narrator and simple yet candid protagonist of William Tappan Thompson’s epistolary sketches. This reading is also presented in another article I published in *The Mark Twain Annual* in 2016, titled “Tom Sawyer Said He Was ‘a stranger from Hicksville, Ohio, and his name was William Thompson’” (Hamada Kassam, “Tom Sawyer Said He Was ‘a stranger from Hicksville, Ohio, and his name was William Thompson,’” *The Mark Twain Annual* 54, no. 1 [2016]: 125–39).

- <sup>10</sup> مغامرات توم سوير (MSA-dubbed version of *Tomu Sōyā no Bōken*), Syrian State Television, 1985–2000.
- <sup>11</sup> Mahir Nassim and Farid Abdulrahman, مغامرات هاكليري فن (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) (Cairo: Maktabat Misr [Egypt’s Library], Book No. 185 in The Thousand Books Project, 1958).
- <sup>12</sup> Nassim, مغامرات هاكليري فن, 7–8.
- <sup>13</sup> See Mariam Abdulmalik, “*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in Arabic Translations: A Case Study,” (PhD diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 2016); the two other translations are Shawqi Alameer, مغامرات هكليري فن (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) (Cairo: Egypt International Company for Publication-Longman, 1992); and Nasr Abdulrahman, مغامرات هكليري فن (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) (Cairo: Al-Hay’ah Al-Amah li Qusor Al-Aaqafa GOCP, 2015).
- <sup>14</sup> Abdulmalik, “*The Adventures*,” 30.
- <sup>15</sup> Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 15.
- <sup>16</sup> Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 39.

- <sup>17</sup> Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, introd. Justin Kaplan and foreword and add. Victor Doyno (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 15.
- <sup>18</sup> Nassim, مغامرات هاكلبري فن, 22. This is my English translation of the following paragraph:  
 "كما أنني لم استطع أن أفهمه حتى كبرت فعرفت قيمة الصلاة التي لم تستطع "الآنسة واطسون" أن تفهمني قيمتها في ذلك الوقت، وكم كنت أحمقا وأنا صغير." (نسيم ٢٢)
- <sup>19</sup> Abdulmalik rightly maintains that Nassim's translation "failed to reflect the voice of its main character ... by portraying him as an educated, well-mannered, and civilized kid, which is just the opposite of the original Huck Finn" (38).
- <sup>20</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 12.
- <sup>21</sup> Nassim, مغامرات هاكلبري فن, 17. This is my English translation of the following paragraph:  
 "جماعة توم سووير" و"مجموعة من المغامرين" (نسيم ١٧)
- <sup>22</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 11.
- <sup>23</sup> Nassim, مغامرات هاكلبري فن, 19.
- <sup>24</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 13.
- <sup>25</sup> Nassim, مغامرات هاكلبري فن, 19. Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 13.
- <sup>26</sup> Nassim, مغامرات هاكلبري فن, 19. This is my English translation of the following paragraph:  
 "سيكون أهم عمل لنا هو تعقب اللصوص وقطاع الطرق، فإذا ثبت لنا أنهم مجرمون حقا ويسلبون الناس أموالهم وماشيئهم، عملنا على استعادة هذا كله منهم ورده إلى أصحابه، أما عن طريق البوليس وما بطريق المفاجأة. ولن يكون في ذلك اغتصاب، فنحن لسنا مغتصبين ولا نحب الاعتداء على أحد. ولكن إذا ثبت أن من هؤلاء الخارجين على المجتمع قتلة وسفاحين، ساعدنا البوليس على القبض عليهم وكف أذاهم عن الناس." (نسيم ١٩)
- <sup>27</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 273-74.
- <sup>28</sup> Nassim, مغامرات هاكلبري فن, 286-87.
- <sup>29</sup> Mohammad, Kawthar Mahmoud, trans., مغامرات هاكلبري فن (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), translations of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, (Cairo: Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture, 2012).
- <sup>30</sup> Abdulmalik's research assesses how Nassim, Alameer, and Abdulrahman approached Twain's novel and presented it to Arab readers in three different periods of Egyptian history, which she dubs the Golden Era (1950s-1960s), the Cluttered Era (1990s), and the Openness Era (after 2011). She focuses on how different translation movements

in these three different periods profoundly influenced and shaped the three translations of Twain's novel.

- <sup>31</sup> Abdulmalik, "The Adventures," 33.
- <sup>32</sup> Abdulmalik, "The Adventures," 35.
- <sup>33</sup> Abdulmalik, "The Adventures," 32.
- <sup>34</sup> Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 27.
- <sup>35</sup> Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 26.
- <sup>36</sup> Abdulmalik concludes her review of Abdulrahman's translation by stating that "[h]is language was simple, direct, and clear. I believe that this translation is the most complete and accurate one until now" (39–40).
- <sup>37</sup> Mark Twain, "Explanatory," *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, introd. Justin Kaplan and foreword and add. Victor Doyno (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), XXI.
- <sup>38</sup> Kassam, *Arabic Huck*, unpublished manuscript.
- <sup>39</sup> Arbia Naimi and Ayda Knan, "La question de l'esclavage dans *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* et ses traductions arabes," Master's thesis, under the supervision of Ronald Jenn and Tatiana Milliaressi, Université de Lille, 2021.
- <sup>40</sup> G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville and A. Popovic, "al-Zandj," in *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, first published online in 2010, <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789004206106\\_eifo\\_COM\\_1379](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789004206106_eifo_COM_1379)>
- <sup>41</sup> Naimi and Knan, "La question de l'esclavage dans *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* et ses traductions arabes," (Master's thesis, under the supervision of Ronald Jenn and Tatiana Milliaressi, Université de Lille, 2021).
- <sup>42</sup> Nassim, مغامرات هاكليري فن, 13. The following short paragraph by Nassim makes three references to Jim as زنجي (zandji):
- "وكان خادم الأنسه واطسون الزنجي، واسمه جيم، جالسا عند باب المطبخ، وكان في استطاعتنا أن نراه بوضوح، لأن ضوءا خافتا كان ينبعث من خلفه؛ وما لبث الزنجي أن هب واقفا ومد عنقه الى الخارج زهاء دقيقة وهو يصيح السمع، ثم صاح:  
- من هناك؟
- وأصاخ الزنجي السمع فترة أطول من ذي قبل، ثم أقبل يسير على أطراف أصابعه، وتوقف بيني وبين توم." (نسيم ١٣)
- <sup>43</sup> Abdulmalik, "The Adventures," 47.
- <sup>44</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 5.
- <sup>45</sup> Kassam, *Arabic Huck*, unpublished manuscript.

- <sup>46</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 1.
- <sup>47</sup> Mohammad, Table of Contents, مغامرات هاكلبيري فين, 6.
- <sup>48</sup> Kassam, *Arabic Huck*, unpublished manuscript.

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