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First of all I'd like to say that I am a person who could rarely be lost in any sense except that of finding streets and locations—I was born with the gift, which some might consider a curse, of a kind of internal radar, of knowing my way and my target. I've had this sense since I was a child and before reading any Holy Book: the Qur'an or the Bible. Since I was a child I have hated lying so much, and reproached my eldest sister at the age of three for lying to me. I loved music as well. I cared for sincerity and honesty in whatever I felt and, hence, I demanded that I be treated in that manner; something made me closer to animals and birds rather than human beings. Poor teachers of mine, they suffered a lot to convince me that they were right. I am saying all of this to introduce you to the field of poetic translation, because these qualities are very necessary for a translator of poems, i.e. honesty, musical ears, investigating for the right things behind things.

I never thought of translating my English poems into Arabic, though I taught translation at the primary and advanced levels for more than a decade. One of my students translated my poem “The Dreamy Shadow and the Eagle Sparrow” and I kept her translation, with slight changes, and it is in my first book of poetry. I did that out of respect and encouragement for her and for all of the other students who try to translate for me or any other poet.

Then I was invited to read my poetry in a festival that was held when the capital Riyadh was chosen as the capital of culture for the year 2000. They asked me to translate at least six of my poems and I did not object since I already taught translation. Actually I was thrilled by the new experience that I was about to dive into. I am not a specialist in linguistic theories of translation, yet I have the ability to do the work since I speak and write well in both Arabic, my mother tongue, and English, my field of study. Saudi and non-Saudi writers have praised my Arabic and English articles in different Saudi Arabian and English newspapers. I enjoyed the process of translation and I felt like reliving the experience, but in a different mode. The accumulated experiences and feelings that made me write in the first place (but which ended years ago), were relived passionately in a way that suited my passionate Arabic veins. It was a fantastic experience, the likes of which I had never passed through before. The reliving of painful experiences caused sleepless nights that I passed translating and crying at the same time. Therefore, my true emotions reached my Arabic audience and some of them cried when I read the Arabic versions of my elegies about my mother and step-mother. My translation was not literal, for I was translating creatively. Creative writing, for me, could not be translated except creatively. I added phrases and sentences which elaborated the meaning of my poetry for my Arabic audience (who had a totally different background), as I did with the lines that display the effect of Shakespeare's plays on my images. For example the lines in my poem about divorce:

Facing you in wonder
At the serpent under
The petals of the flower

which reflect the image Lady Macbeth used in her villainous advice to her husband, could not be translated exactly as they are. Yet the similarity between the man and the snake

echoed in another line in which the man’s voice was like a snake’s hissing. Another image: “full of the milk of human kindness” could not be translated literally because it would appear meaningless to the Arabic audience, few of whom are in touch with the Shakespearean play. Moreover, in the translation of my poem “Fired Fear & Firing Fruitful Feelings,” I added a few humorous lines which do not exist in the English poem, in order to make fun of literal translation, which is something the Arabs like to joke about.

My amazement reached its peak when my poems that touch the supposedly taboo topic of the expression of female sexuality, such as “Taming the Wild Horse” and “Hide and Seek,” were accepted by the Arabic audience as well as the officials in the Ministry of Information. It seems that I fell into the trap of stereotyping which many people in the West and other parts of the world fall into when speaking about Arabia. I went well-equipped to the Ministry of Information to justify my poems about sexuality and to tell them that it is mentioned in my Arabic introduction that these feelings were expressed for a husband, or for a man who was about to be a husband, not in a religiously forbidden relation—but they did not even ask because it was art...or rather a kind of work of imagination. My book took only a few days to be read and to officially receive permission to be printed. I began to analyze the reasons for myself, saying: maybe they accepted it because in some poems I reminded the beloved that fear of committing “the forbidden” was killing me from within. But this was not the case of all the love poems; and in some of them I confessed in English as in Arabic that I was pondering guiltlessly over the “forbidden,” but did not proceed to action. I became content that they did not care whether my experience was lived or imagined.

I also omitted some expressions, very few, which could not be understood easily by Arabic readers. I tried to create internal music through alliteration and assonance, as well as use a rhyme scheme, though not on a regular basis. I was not afraid of my free verse being rejected, though we prefer classical poetry in Saudi Arabia.

I began to analyze people’s reactions to my words: what was the cause of the effect of my words, my non-classical poetry? I began to ask those who wept and to my astonishment they almost all answered in the same way: the amount of sincerity and honesty in describing your feelings, your daring attitude, your musical sense and your passionate reading drew tears from our eyes. We cried even for your son’s feelings when he lost his cat. They helped me to reach this conclusion: whether one’s poetry is classical or formal is not the main issue, even in the Arabic world now. What is important is the description of feeling. The Arabic equivalent for the word “poetry” is “she’r,” the noun that is taken from the verb “sha’ar,” “felt or to feel.” The idea of expressing one’s feeling in an honest way is the essence of poetry even for the Arabs who care so much for the music conveyed by poetry. The true expression of the feeling is the “essence,” even to the musical Arabic ear.