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**Translation of Poetry Given Two Versions of the Same Poem**  
(on Saadi Yusef's and Abed Ismael's translations of "Song of Myself")

Regardless of the subject matter, or the morphological or stylistic differences between the source and target language, when beginning a new project, all translators find themselves in the same universal dilemma: are they to be faithful to the original text, or do they create a different one? This question has been the starting point of many unresolved debates on the art of translation, and no matter what answers theorists provide to this dilemma translated texts continue to fuel the conflict among translators.

The more literary a text is, the more difficult it is to translate. The purpose behind translating a literary text is usually different from that of translating other kinds of discourse. When working on a professional text, scientific or factual, the translator aims make the information in the original text accessible to monolingual readers of the target language. The style of the original or the newly created text doesn't really matter as long as the information is accurately delivered. However, when it comes to literature, translation refutes such simplicity, and the translation process becomes a test of the translator's creativity, rather than just their translating skills. This is why many of those who started as mere translators of literature ended up as creators of their own, and vice versa.

However, this is not always the case. Some translators prefer to produce an exact replica of the original text in the target language. This is apparent in Syrian poet Abed Ismael's translation of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," particularly when it is compared with the more literary translation of the same poem produced by Saadi Yusef. In his introduction to the translated text, Ismael accuses translators who change Whitman's original text to suit the target language as being "unserious and inaccurate." He believes that any omission, addition or change, on the level of vocabulary or structure, is done simply because the translator, first, failed to understand "the idiomatic English" of Whitman's language, and second, failed to grasp deeply the particularity of Whitman's poetics. Ismael produced another translation for the poem that, he asserts, is closer to the original text. In another words, Ismael decided to be more faithful to the source text rather than to the target language. He wants his readers to know Whitman's language and prosody as created by the poet.

What Abed Ismael complained about was exactly what Saadi Yusef did in his earlier Arabic version of Whitman's poem. The Iraqi poet deleted phrases, changed the rhythm, and transformed the masculine into feminine. One excuse for these changes concerns the problematic pronoun "you," which in English can be single or plural, formal and informal, masculine or feminine, while the Arabic renders separate pronouns for all these functions. Saadi Yusef's version, if compared to the original on one hand, and to Ismael's version on the other, will appear totally different in structure, and many of its words--sometimes even lines--cannot be traced back to their English origin. Such linguistic or structural comparisons will render Saadi's poem a deformed version, to which Whitman's work bears only ghostly resemblance, while Ismael's will be immediately recognized as close kin to, if not the direct offspring of, the English original.

Yet what seems to be Saadi's pitfall actually is the true asset of his translation. While he "messed with" the poem's basic structure, changing the distinguishing features that gave the poem its strength and value for decades, he actually managed to grasp and accurately translate the true democratic spirit of the poem. His translation is Arabic in its cultural implications, spirit, and even in its structure, applying Arabic free verse forms and prose poem prosody. Such rendering is not as faulty as Ismael suggests in his introduction: it is only a different approach toward the poem that every translator is entitled to adopt. Making a poem from a poem is, after all, the basic purpose of poetry translation, not simply showing readers what foreign poets are writing.