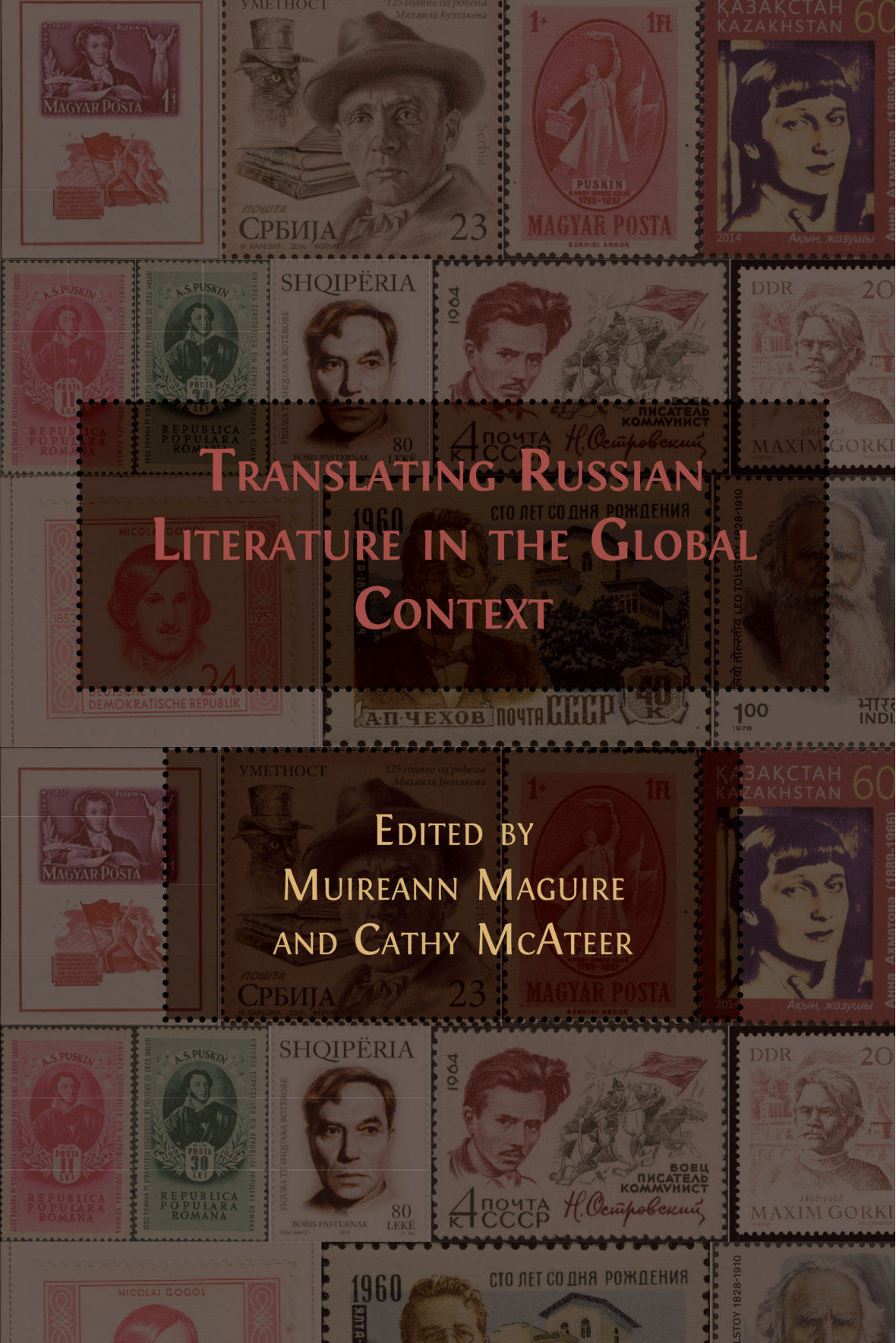

Translating Russian Literature in the Global Context

Edited by
Muireann Maguire
and Cathy McAteer

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The Arabic-speaking Peoples

Maksim Gorky and Arabic Literature: From *The Thousand and One Nights* to Contemporary Classics

Sarali Gintsburg

> Gorky is the writer who belongs to all the unfortunate and oppressed on the entire surface of the Earth, backways and sideways—that is, to the overwhelming majority of humankind.
>
> Ra'īf al-Khūri[1]

> Travel! and thou shalt find new friends for old ones left behind;
> Toil! for the sweets of human life by toil and moil are found:
> The stay—at—home no honour wins nor aught attains but want;
> So leave thy place of birth and wander all the world around.
>
> *The Thousand and One Nights*[2]

Introduction: Arabic Literature in the Twentieth Century, the Role of Russian Literature in its Revival, and the Place of Gorky

In Western literary scholarship, the development of Arabic literature throughout the twentieth century is traditionally linked to the influence of Western literature, principally French and English. The role of Russian and early Soviet

1 Ra'īf al-Khūri, "Ghūrki allathi faqadathu al-insānīya', *aṭ-Ṭalī'a*, 2:6, 548–55. All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

2 'Tale of Nur ad-Din and his Son', *The Thousand and One Nights*, trans. by Richard Burton, 9 vols (Burton Club, 1885–86), I (1885), p. 122.

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0340.20

writers often remains underestimated. This pro-Western approach is true up to a certain point. Indeed, from the end of the nineteenth through the first third of the twentieth century, the educated Arabic reader would often encounter foreign literature, encompassing Russian and early Soviet literature, mainly through English and French translations. The very first known translation of Russian literature into Arabic was a prose version of Ivan Krylov's fables—themselves a transcreation from Lafontaine and Aesop—produced in 1863 in St Petersburg by Khaleba Abdullah, also known as Fedor Ivanovich Kelsey (1819–1912), and adapted and re-published four years later in London (still in classical Arabic) by the Syrian journalist Risqallah Hassun (1825–80).[3] But such English and French translations form only a small fragment of the history of Russian and Soviet literature in the Arab world which, during the twentieth century, became very influential among Arab readers. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Arabic literature began to assimilate influences from Western literature. The British Arabist scholar Hamilton Gibb, for instance, mentioned that during this period in Egypt, a group of Modernist literary critics and writers emerged who saw it as their mission to revive Arabic literature by abandoning the traditional classical Arabic canon, which they replaced with canons borrowed from Western literatures.[4] Gibb also noted that these plans for literary revival were partly inspired by literary nationalism, since the ultimate goal of the Modernist movement was not to blindly copy foreign literature, but to improve their own. During this period, although public interest was only mild, Arabs perceived Russian culture as exotic. Ignatii Krachkovskii, a key figure in Russian and Soviet Arab Studies, wrote that the relatively few Arabic books that mentioned Russian culture depicted Russia as an imaginary, almost fictional place.[5] Only after the Russian Revolution of 1905, and primarily in the

3 Lina Kandakzhi, 'Nekotorye aspekty literaturnykh vzaimodeistvii Rossii i Sirii' in *Problemy lingvistiki, metodiki obucheniia inostrannym iazikam i literaturovedeniia v svete mezhkul'turnoi kommunikatsii: Materialy II Mezhdunarodnoi nauchno-prakticheskoi konferentsii 24–25 marta 2011*, editor unknown (Ufa: Izdatel'stvo BGPU, 2011), pp. 146–48 (p. 146), https://www.ippo.ru/historyippo/article/nekotorye-aspekty-literaturnyh-vzaimodeystviy-ross-200499.

4 Hamilton Gibb, *Studies in Contemporary Arabic Literature*. Vol III Egyptian modernists (London: University of London, 1929).

5 Ignatii Krachkovskii (1883–1953) was a leading scholar in global Arab Studies. Krachkovskii wrote on a wide range of topics related to Arabic language and literature, history, medieval literature, Arab Christian literature, Semitology, and so on. Krachkovskii spent his entire academic career as a professor of Arabic language at St Petersburg (later Leningrad) State University; his scholarly achievements were acknowledged not only in the Soviet Union but throughout the Arab world and in the West. He was so well-regarded that Western Arabists commonly studied Russian just to read Krachkovskii's publications on their field. For more on the Lithuanian-born Krachkovskii's fascinating career and internationally recognised achievements, see his former student Anna Arkadievna Dolinina's biography (in Russian), *Nevol'nik dolga* (St Petersburg:

Levant and Egypt, did Russian literature, or indeed Russian culture, start to attract greater attention.[6]

New Russian-influenced literary trends first developed in Arabic poetry. This was because, in the early twentieth century, the prose genres of Arabic literature lacked the flexibility to allow for innovation and change.[7] Although until the First World War, the Arab world in general still knew very little about Russia and Russians, a region already existed where the two cultures could mingle without any intermediary. This was the Syro-Palestinian region, or Levant, where, in the 1890s, the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society founded several Russian Orthodox schools for the local Arab Orthodox population.[8] Several students at one such school, in Nazareth, would become famous Arab writers, as well as future literary translators. Among these graduates of the Nazareth seminary was one of the most prominent Russian-Arabic literary translators of the epoch, Selim Qob'eyn (1870–1951), a Palestinian-born Egyptian writer and journalist who was drawn to Tolstoy's teachings as much as to his fiction.[9] In 1901, Qob'eyn released an Arabic translation of Tolstoy's autobiographical and non-fiction writings, later also translating *The Kreutzer Sonata* (*Kreitserova sonata*, 1889). Another graduate of the Nazareth pedagogical seminary, the Palestinian Khalil

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Sankt Peterburgskoe vostokovedenie, 1994). Mikhail Rodionov describes the political repression of Krachkovskii and other leading Soviet Arabists in 'Profiles under Pressure: Orientalists in Petrograd/Leningrad, 1918–1956', in *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies*, ed. by Michael Kemper and Stephan Conermann (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 47–65; a useful overview is provided in Michael Kemper, 'Introduction: Krachkovskii and Soviet Arabic Studies, or: *What* is *not* in *Among Arabic Manuscripts*', in *I.Y. Kratchkovsky, Among Arabic Manuscripts: Memories of Libraries and Men*, ed. by Michael Kemper (Leiden: Brill Classics in Islam, 2016), pp. 1–24.

6 For detailed discussion of these novels, see Ignatii Krachkovskii,'Otzvuki revoliutsii 1905 goda v arabskoi khudozhestvennoi literature', *Sovetskoe Vostokovedenie*, 3 (1945), 5–14.

7 For more information see A.A. Dolinina, *Voskhodi lun na stoiankakh veselyia* (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1983); and Mike Baynham and Sarali Gintsburg, 'Tar or honey? Space and time of Moroccan migration in a video sketch comedy 'l-kāmīra la-kum', in *Narrating Migrations from Africa and the Middle East: A Spatio-Temporal Approach*, ed. by S. Gintsburg, R. Breeze and M. Baynham (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), pp. 157–74.

8 On the activities and the role this society had in the Middle East, see Aleksandr Grushevoi, 'Plany razvitiia obrazovaniia v russkikh shkolakh na Blizhnem Vostoke pered Pervoi mirovoi voinoi', *Khistianstvo na Blizhnem Vostoke*, 4 (2020), 37–56.

9 For more on Qob'eyn's role in the history of translating Russian and early Soviet literature into Arabic, see Ignatii Krachkovskii's various essays on 'Russko-Arabskie literaturnie sviazi' in I. I. Krachkovskii, *Izbrannye sochineniia*, ed. by V. A. Gordlevski, 6 vols (Moscow and Leningrad: Izadatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1955–60), III, pp. 267–311. On his translations of Tolstoy, see Kirill Gordeev, '"Velikii moskovitskii mudrets" i ego arabskie pochitateli' (2004), https://www.ippo.ru/historyippo/article/velikiy-moskovitskiy-mudrec-i-ego-arabskie-pochita-200423.

Beidas (1874–1949), translated Pushkin's *The Captain's Daughter* (*Kapitanskaia dochka*, 1836; *Ibnat al-Kubtan*, 1898) and various stories by Gogol and Tolstoy, early in his distinguished career as an educator, author and translator.[10] Despite widespread interest in Tolstoy, Krachkovskii identified Gorky as one of the most widely read Russian authors in Arabic translation, closely followed by Anton Chekhov and then Fedor Dostoevsky.[11]

Curiously, in Soviet Russia, Gorky was effectively hostage both to his personal popularity and the politicisation of almost everything he would do, say, or write. He was frequently represented as the precursor of Socialist Realism which, as other authorities insist, is simply not true.[12] Numerous parks, cultural centres, theatres, libraries, streets and even towns and cities were named after him. Curiously, this disproportionate attention to Gorky has caused fatigue and even satiety among Russian readers. By contrast, in the Arab world, Gorky, whose image was not so much politicised as romanticised, became an almost legendary hero, a survivor who rose from the depths of his society, overcoming difficulties along the way to finally attain a metaphorical Olympus. For Arabs, Gorky acquired the glamour of the fighter and became a very popular writer, remaining so even today. In the Arab world, a popular myth circulated about Gorky's supposed Eastern connection; as one of the authors and propagators of this myth, Selim Qob'eyn, suggested, the writer may have had Oriental ancestors. Rumours also spread that the first book the youthful Gorky ever read was a Russian translation of *The Thousand and One Nights*.[13] Gorky's influence on Arabic literature is difficult to underestimate: he was one of the few writers to influence the minds and philosophy of several generations of Arab writers and intellectuals. This influence manifests both directly, through obviously similar plots, and more discreetly, by (for example) echoes in Arabic literature of Gorky's humanist concerns.

In this chapter, to show the extent of Gorky's impact on the literary life of the Arab world,[14] I first briefly introduce the history of translation of Russian

10 Kandakzhi, 'Nekotorye aspekty literaturnykh vzaimodeistvii Rossii i Sirii', p. 146. Intriguingly, Beidas was a cousin of the noted Palestinian scholar, Edward Said.

11 For more detailed discussion on Gorky's influence in the Arab world during the first half of the twentieth century, see Ignatii Krachkovskii's essay 'Gor'kii i arabskaia literatura', in Krachkovskii, *Izbrannye sochineniia*, III (1957), pp. 271–311; and S. Areshan, 'Gor'kii i literaturnyi vostok', *Sovetskoe vostokovedenie*, 3 (1945), 177–82.

12 See, for instance, Genrikh Mitin, 'Evangelie ot Maksima: zametki o rannem romane A. M. Gor'kogo *Mat*',' *Literatura v shkole*, 4:99 (1989), 48–65.

13 Krachkovskii notes how this myth developed: in fact, Gorky wrote the preface to the first direct Arabic to Russian translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* in 1929 (see Krachkovskii, 'Russkaia literatura i arabi v proizvedeniiakh Gorkogo', in *Izvestiia Akademii Nauk Soiuza SSR*, 5 (1), p. 47.

14 The term 'Arab world' refers to the twenty-two countries whose primary language is Arabic. Arabic-speaking countries are located in: Africa, particularly the north;

literature into the Arabic language in the twentieth century. I then briefly discuss the history of translations of Maksim Gorky's works, including aspects specific to his Arab reception, including the mythologisation of his personality. Next, I present two case studies which demonstrate how motifs and ideas from Gorky's novels and plays were understood and implemented in the literary works of two different Arabic writers from Egypt: Khairy Shalaby (1938–2011) and Albert Cossery (1913–2008). I will conclude by summarising my most important findings.

Russian Literature in Arabic Translation: Egypt, the Levant, Iraq and the USSR

Focus on Gorky

As Damrosch and other researchers maintain, once any national literature starts circulating outside its linguistic and cultural homeland, moving into the sphere of world literature, it inevitably undergoes transformations conditioned by the linguistic and cultural norms of its new home.[15] Gorky's afterlife in Arabic confirms this statement. The Arab world presupposes a different cultural background and literary tradition, which for quite some time had been developing independently from Western and Russian literatures. As a Semitic language, Arabic is linguistically remote from European languages, whether Germanic, Romance, or Slavic. Therefore, the process of translating literature from or into Arabic almost always poses difficult choices for its translator, often necessitating extensive domestication and/or adaptation of the text to suit the target readership.[16]

During the first half of the twentieth century, three regions could be considered major centres of cultural and literary life in the Arab world: the Levant, consisting of modern Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine; Egypt; and Iraq.[17] The first Arab literary translators to work directly with Russian texts

West Asia; and the Arabian Peninsula. These regions are referred to collectively as the Arab world or Arab nations.

15 David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003).

16 See Sarali Gintsburg, "'Ne smeshno!" Osobennosti perevoda arabskoi iumoristicheskoi literatury na russkii iazyk', in *Miri literaturnogo perevoda*, ed. by A. Ia. Livergant, 2 vols (Moscow: Institut Perevoda, 2018), I (2018), pp. 336–39.

17 In this chapter, I use the words 'centre' and 'periphery' only in the sense of sequences of cultural and literary activities noticeable by outsiders rather than in Casanovan terms. The Arab world is a complex construct currently comprising twenty-two countries and it would be naive to argue that the relationship between these twenty-two countries is driven by anxiety or based on the centre-periphery

came from the Syro-Palestinian region, followed slightly later by those from Egypt, while Iraqi translators emerged during the 1930s. Other Arab nations were not yet ready to take the lead in the cultural sphere.[18] Arab literature, like translations of literary works by European and Russian writers, was usually published in cultural journals and newspapers which played, at that time, an extremely important role in facilitating the cultural, religious, and literary transformation of Arab society.[19] Among these newspapers and journals were *al-Manār* (Beirut), *al-Murāqib* (Beirut), *an-Nafā'is* (Haifa), *aṭ-Ṭalī'a* (Damascus), and *as-Siyāsa* (Cairo).

Texts translated in the pages of these publications usually had an explanatory preface, where the translator or editor would outline for the reader the main topics arising.[20] Such prefaces varied in length: Selim Qob'eyn typically wrote two pages, as discussed below; Antun Ballan, a Syrian translator, would provide just a few lines. Among the first Russian writers to be discussed by Arab intellectuals and translated into Arabic were Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Chekhov, and Gorky. However, the history of literary translations of Russian and early Soviet writers into Arabic is poorly documented and often rather unreliable: Krachkovskii's accounts tend to be anecdotal rather than systematic. It can be difficult to deduce who translated Gorky, or when and where Arabic versions were produced. My research resonates with Jeremy Munday's call to take into account microhistories of translators, with the difference, however, that in the case of the Arab world, we have no means of restoring their life stories, or, in some cases, even knowing their names.[21] An additional complication is the fact that such translations would often appear in part only in newspapers and journals, frequently without the author's name. Finally, the Arab world lacked a system for registering and cataloguing literary production. Thus today, when we discuss the history of translating Gorky into Arabic, the most reliable source of information remains the data collated by Krachkovskii in his 1956 article 'Gorky and Arabic Literature' ('Gorkii i arabskaia literatura').[22]

According to Krachkovskii's article, the first Arabic translator of Gorky was Ibrahim Faraj, a Lebanese immigrant who settled in Brazil. Faraj translated three short stories into Arabic, published in São Paulo in 1906, although their Arabic

principle. Later in this essay I will address the difficulties of applying Casanova's approach to the Arab world.

18 On the development of Arabic literature in the Arab world in late 1800s and early 1900s, see Krachkovskii, *Izbrannye sochineniia*, III (various essays).

19 See Sabry Hafez, 'Cultural Journals and Modern Arabic literature: a Historical Overview', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 37 (2017), 9–49.

20 Although this was not a unique practice, I believe that the analysis of such prefaces and paratexts allows us to better understand the reception of literary works in foreign cultures.

21 See Jeremy Munday, 'Using Primary Sources to Produce a Microhistory of Translation and Translators: Theoretical and Methodological Concerns', *The Translator*, 20:1 (2014), 64–80.

22 See 'Gorkii i arabskaia literatura', in *Izbrannye sochineniia*, III, pp. 271–311.

titles make it impossible to determine the original texts: 'Insane' ('Majānūn'), 'The Devil' ('Šayṭān') and 'A Lie' ('Kithb').[23] In 1907, Selim Qobe'yn translated and published four journalistic articles by Gorky: 'The King Who Holds the Flag High' ('Korol', kotoriii vysoko derzhit svoe znamia', 1906), 'One of the Kings of the Republic' ('Odin iz koroleii respubliki', 1906), 'Magnificent France' ('Prekrasnaia Frantsia', 1906), and 'On the Jews' ('O evreiakh', 1906). Qob'eyn's preface presented his personal view of Gorky as a freedom fighter and a rebel. Gorky is shown as a writer who openly criticised censorship in tsarist Russia and whose pen was sharper than the proverbial sword. Although Qob'eyn had never visited Russia, Gorky's personality seemed so familiar and his thoughts so pertinent to Arab reality, that he described Gorky as part Oriental, at least psychologically. Other translations of Gorky's works also appeared at this time, often translated via French, English or German. We know that in this period a number of Gorky's fundamental works were translated and published for Arab readers, among them: *Mother* (*Mat'*, 1907, extracts only), *A Confession* (*Ispoved'*, 1908, extracts only), and *My Childhood* (*Detstvo*, 1913, abridged).

From the 1930s onwards, Iraq joined Egypt and the Levant as a key centre of literary translation and book publishing in the Arab world. Gorky's *Chelkash* (*Chelkhash*, 1895) was published in 1932 (in a translation by the Iraqi translator Abdalla Jaddawi).[24] It would be tempting to define the literary situation as a kind of Arab Republic of Letters, following Casanova. But this would oversimplify the complex and multidirectional processes that existed in the Arab sphere at that time. It might also imply an element of elitism. Several attempts to apply the notion of the Republic of Letters to the Arabic context have subsequently been criticised.[25] Moreover, in the Arab world, the literary processes that unfolded during the first half of the twentieth century were characterised by a strong nationalist drive—each Arab country sought to follow its own national path without becoming peripheral. Krachkovskii, for instance, termed this phenomenon "particularism".[26]

23 In this chapter, I do not touch on the topic of translating the titles of Gorky's books into Arabic. This would have led me too far away from the main focus of my contribution. I also want to avoid confusion with titles in Russian and English, although, I admit that analysis of Arabic translations of titles would be an exciting topic for research.

24 See Mohammed Qasim Hassan Al-Mas'ud, *Retseptsiia proizvedenii Gorkogo o russkoi revoliutsii v literaturakh stran arabskogo vostoka* (Voronezh: Voronezhskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 2014).

25 See for instance, Reuven Snir's response to Muhsin Musawi's *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015): Reuven Snir, 'World Literature, Republics of Letters, and the Arabic Literary System: The "Modernists" in the Defendants' Bench—A Review Article', in *Mamlūk Studies Review*, XXII (2019), 137–92.

26 See Ignatii Krachkovskiii's essay 'Novoarabskaia literatura', in *Izbrannye sochineniia*, III, pp. 65–85 (specifically pp. 69–79).

A new phase started after the Second World War, when literary translation was concentrated in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, but also in the USSR, where three new publishing houses with the express aim of translating Russian and Soviet literature into foreign languages were founded: Progress, Raduga, and Znanie. From the 1950s to the 1980s, new translations of Gorky appeared at an increased rate: many were works previously unknown to the Arab reader, such as *Foma Gordeev* (*Foma Gordeev,* 1899) and *The Artamonov Business* (*Delo Artamonovykh,* 1925).[27] Others were new, supposedly improved retranslations of known works such as *Mother*, *The Lower Depths* (*Na dne*, 1902; translated by Abdelhalim al-Bashlun, published in 1962 in Cairo),[28] and *A Confession* (1968, translated by Naofal Niof). New retranslations continue to appear even today—since 2019 the Canadian publishing house Masaa has published the latest Arabic translations of *My Childhood* and *Among People* (*V ludiakh,* 1915), which were completed by Ahmad ar-Rahbi, an Omani translator based in Moscow.

We have seen that the first translators of Gorky represented him as a symbol of the fight for freedom and individual rights, a kind of "stormy petrel", the famous epithet for an independent and revolutionary character drawn from Gorky's poem 'The Song of the Stormy Petrel' ('Burevestnik', 1901). This image coincided with a widespread Arab ideal during this period, as many dreamed of overthrowing their Turkish rulers and, later, Western colonisers. Other themes highlighted by Gorky, such as the role of women in society, or the lives of the poor and oppressed, resonated with Arab concerns and made Gorky one of the most influential and widely read Russian and Soviet writers in the Arab world. His persona thus acquired almost legendary status. It is also important to remember that besides his reputation as the founding father of Socialist Realism, Gorky was also famous as a Romantic writer. Some of his early Romantic works were translated into Arabic and warmly received because Arabic literature was then undergoing its own Romantic period.[29] These early works included *The Old Man*

27 Later, these novels were published several times in different translations. For instance, Dolinina mentions that during the period between 1954–68 the novel *Mother* was published in five different translations. See A.A. Dolinina, 'Iz istorii arabskikh perevodov romana M. Gorkogo "Mat"', *Vestnik Leningradskogo universiteta*, 4:20 (1980), pp. 59–64 (p. 59).

28 Although I was unable to establish whether there were any earlier translations of *The Lower Depths* into Arabic, it is certain that by the 1920s, educated Arabs could already access English and French translations of the novel: this 1902 play had by 1907 already been translated into English and published in New York. In France, at least two different translations were published, in 1904 and 1905. See Yuliya Bystrova, 'Iz istorii russko-frantsuzskikh kulturnikh sviazey v nachale XX veka (populiarnost rannego tvorchestva M. Gorkogo vo Frantsii', *Vestnik SGTU*, 1 (2007), https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/iz-istorii-russko-frantsuzskih-kulturnyh-svyazey-v-nachale-xx-veka-populyarnost-rannego-tvorchestva-m-gorkogo-vo-frantsii.

29 See the texts discussed in *Arabskaia romanticheskaia proza XIX-XX vekov*, ed. by Anna Dolinina and Galina Bogolyubova (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1981).

(*Starik*, 1915, translated into Arabic in 1906), and *Song of a Falcon* (*Pesnia o Sokole*, 1899, translated and published in 1914 in *as-Sā'iḥ*, an Arabic literary journal published by members of the Arab immigrant community in New York). This is why the theme of the storm appears in works by several Arabic Romantic writers of that era, notably the Lebanese-American novelist Kahlil Gibran (1883–1931), author of *The Prophet* (1923) and Mikhail Naimy (1889–1988), another graduate of the Russian Orthodox seminary in Nazareth. Finally, I emphasise that, within the Arab world, literary translations could circulate freely: a book published, for instance, in Cairo, was also accessible in Jordan, Tunis, Morocco, or Algeria.

Even after a national literature has begun to circulate in translation in a new culture, its direct influence can be traced within the ultimate target language. This is certainly true of early translations of Gorky into Arabic, which, as I have mentioned, were sometimes made not from the Russian original, but by means of French or English pivot translations. And as we have seen, the records of the history of the translation of Gorky (and other Russian authors) into Arabic are fragmented. This makes it difficult to determine which translations, and even which intermediary languages, were used. Nevertheless, I will attempt to demonstrate that despite these complex trajectories, Gorky's influence on Arabic writing can still be traced. It is important to note that in the context of Arabic literature (and indeed other literatures), it is almost always difficult to establish with absolute certainty which literary work has been influenced by which writer(s). My criteria for identifying Gorky's influence are twofold. Firstly, Gorky, together with Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Dostoevsky, was considered by Arab writers to be among the most influential writers of the twentieth century in the Arab world. Therefore, Gorky, his ideas, and his mythology contributed to shaping the values of several generations of Arabic writers from the 1920s onwards. Secondly, I am guided by the views of readers themselves.

Gorky's immense popularity as a writer and as an almost legendary personality can be explained by a number of factors, as I have mentioned above, including the relevance of his topics to Arab readers and his rejection of glib answers or interpretations. Finally, in the course of his career as a writer, Gorky's works evolved from Romantic, to Realist, and by the end of his life he was known as the founding father of Socialist Realism. His work thus possessed the potential to adapt to the settings and norms of other cultures, thereby being subsumed into other national literatures. Moreover, the anti-hero, or vagabond, one of the most recognisable of Gorky's protagonists, contributed to the positive reception of his literary production in the Arab world. A huge number of novels, stories, and plays written by Arabic writers in the course of the twentieth century were inspired by the motifs, issues, and questions they encountered in Gorky's fiction. Among these writers were the Nobel Prize-winning Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz (1911–2006, who was also influenced philosophically and thematically by Dostoevsky), Mikhail Naimy, the Syrian Social Realist novelist Hanna Mina (1924–2018), Ghaib Furman (1927–90), and many others.

To illustrate the scale of Gorky's influence, I have chosen two Egyptian writers whose life trajectories, besides their writing styles and even languages, were strikingly different. The first, Khairy Shalaby (1938–2011), spent his whole life in Egypt and wrote in Arabic, while the second, Albert Cossery (1913–2008), the so-called 'Voltaire of the Nile', was born and raised in Egypt but spent most of his long life in France and wrote exclusively in French. Despite these differences, both Shalaby and Cossery did have access to Gorky's books in Arabic, English, and/or French translations.

At this point, I should emphasise that in no way are my case studies meant to imply that these two writers were not creatively independent, nor to suggest that Gorky was their sole literary influence. This would be erroneous. What I would like to demonstrate, instead, is Gorky's significant and undeniable *influence* on several generations of Arab writers, including Shalaby and Cossery.

Maksim Gorky and Khairy Shalaby: The Rogues, the Women, and Rebellion against the Oppressor

Khairy Shalaby (in Arabic Khayri Shalabi) was a famous Egyptian writer and author of over seventy books, mostly novels and collections of short stories. Among his best-known books are *The Time-Travels of the Man Who Sold Pickles and Sweets* (*Rahalāt at-turši al-halwaji*, 1990), *The Lodging House* (*Wikālat 'Aṭṭīya,* 1999), *The Hasheesh Waiter* (*Sāliḥ Haiṣa,* 2000), and *The Tent Peg* (*al-Watad,* 2003). Shalaby, who was born in rural Egypt, called himself "the singer of the Egyptian street"[30] and, indeed, most of his literary works revolve around the lives of everyday Egyptians, including street people. In his interviews, Shalaby usually emphasised the importance of studying canonical Egyptian and Arabic literature; he was opposed to blindly following Western literary fashions. For Shalaby, *The Thousand and One Nights* sufficed as reading material. On the other hand, he repeatedly named among his literary influences Naguib Mahfouz, Yahya Haqqi (1905–52), and Yusuf Idris (1927–91), who were themselves clearly influenced by Russian literature and specifically by Chekhov, Dostoevsky, and/or Gorky.[31] Shalaby's literary affiliation might be best defined as Middle Eastern Magical Realism, interweaving Egyptian oral traditions and magic tales with

30 ar-Riwā'i Khairy Šalabi: adabi yanba'u min aš-šāri', *Al-Bayān*, 28 December 2008, https://www.albayan.ae/paths/books/2008-12-28-1.823074.

31 On the influence of Russian literature on Yahiya Haqqi, see Miriam Cooke's 'Yahya Haqqi As Critic and Nationalist', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1:1, 21–34. On the influence of Russian literature, principally Gorky and Chekhov, on Yahiya Haqqi and Yusuf Idris, see Elmira Ali-Zade, 'Chekhov v arabskikh stranakh', in *Chekhov i mirovaia literatura* (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2005), III (2005), pp. 228–52.

a Western style.[32] Below, I list some of Shalaby's more Gorky-esque motifs and themes.

The Rogue as Anti-Hero and Protagonist

Shalaby, perhaps partly due to his own early life experiences, appears drawn to rogues, regularly featuring them as protagonists in his novels. This is exemplified by one of his most acclaimed novels: the autobiographical *The Lodging House* (1999). The protagonist strikingly evokes Gorky's public persona: a young man with a very poor village background. Thanks to an unlikely coincidence, this young man becomes a student at the local pedagogical institute. Like Gorky, he is an avid reader who also dreams of becoming a writer. Also like Gorky, he seeks justice, and his quest to achieve it leads him to encounter a local group of Muslim Brothers. Just as Gorky did, this man rebels against unjust treatment and, as a result, gets expelled from the institute. Thus, even at the very beginning of the novel, the main protagonist becomes a rogue (*ṣa'lūk* in Arabic or *bosiak* in Russian), Gorky's archetypal protagonist, also popular in classical Arabic literature. Often witty and charming, rogues are the heart of the story. Even today, the rogue continues to play an important role in oral Arabic narratives.[33]

The "Oppressive Horrors" of Egyptian Life[34]

Describing the lives of all kinds of rogues and vagabonds from the depths of society, and the routine manifestations of cruelty accompanying their lives is a prominent but not central theme of Shalaby's writings. We find numerous descriptions of such lives in *The Lodging House*, *The Hashish Waiter*, and *Time*

32 Casanova notes this trend in Algerian (as well as South American and African) literature, defining it as a manifestation of anxiety experienced by writers from literary peripheries: "the quest for political independence brings with it a need to display and increase the nation's literary wealth and adaptation for the stage of the tales and legends (as well as novels) that constituted the heritage" (p. 227). Adopting this approach, however, would effectively deny Arabic literature the opportunity to explore its own literary canons. On my interpretation of Shalaby's literary style, see Gintsburg (forthcoming), 'Khairy Shalaby's novel *The City of the Dead*: Egyptian Prison Literature with a Russian Twist', *Comparative Literature and Culture*, 26:1 (2024).

33 See Baynham and Gintsburg, 'Tar or Honey?', pp. 157–74.

34 Here I refer to the famous passage from Gorky's *My Childhood*, much cited by Russian speakers to characterise the suffering of the poorest in society, to refer to the meaningless and cruel life of people from the lowest rungs of society: "svintsovye merzosti nashei dikoi russkoi zhizni" ("the oppressive horrors of our wild Russian life"). See Maksim Gor'kii, *Detstvo* (Moscow: Shkol'naia biblioteka, 1955), p. 204; for the translation here I have used Gertrude M. Foakes' English translation, *My Childhood* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1915), p. 346.

Travellings. *The Lodging House* is structured around a run-down caravanserai called Attiya and its dwellers, all from the social underworld: criminals, prostitutes, the unemployed, and so on. Interestingly, similarities between the protagonists of Gorky's famous play *The Lower Depths* and *The Lodging House* are easy to establish: Amm Shawadfi, the mean landlord from *The Lodging House* resembles Kostylev, who is equally grasping and ruthless. Both landlords are portrayed as cynical, cruel, and greedy, although Amm Shawadfi exhibits more humane qualities: he tries to help the main protagonist from time to time, although his help is always self-interested. Another apparently similar character dyad is Aleshka from *The Lower Depths* and Mahrous from *The Lodging House*, both young, hard-working boys, forced to grow up too fast but fond of fun, dancing and, in Aleshka's case, playing the accordion. Mahrous likes to improvise poetry. But both youngsters are already addicts: Aleshka is addicted to alcohol, while Mahrous is addicted to smoking hasheesh. Depictions of everyday cruelty, like the "oppressive horror" portrayed by Gorky a century earlier, also feature prominently in Shalaby's later fiction. In *The Lodging House*, lengthy passages describe acts of cruelty that were routinely committed by the *inglīz*, i.e., the British (in this case, British soldiers) toward Egyptian people during colonial times. Such descriptions echo the police brutality described in Gorky's novel *Mother*, and also in his trilogy of memoirs, which opens with the well-known *My Childhood*. However, unlike Gorky, Shalaby does not seem to call his readers to rebel against injustice and cruelty.

Women as Central Protagonists

Women characters play an important role in Gorky's writing. Gorky's most popular work is almost entirely about a woman: Pelageia Nilovna Vlasova in *Mother.* Largely because of this novel, Gorky achieved mythological status both in Russia and the Arab world. In Soviet Russia, thanks to *Mother*, Gorky was considered the 'founding father' of Socialist Realism. In the Arab world, both *Mother* and *Foma Gordeev* were consulted for discussion of women's rights and the role of women in society. This work clearly influenced Shalaby's writings about women as well: in his novel *The Tent Peg*, he portrays a strong-willed woman from an Egyptian village, a true mother, who will do anything to protect her large family. In his short story 'Food for Children' ('Akl l-'ayāl', 2009),[35] Shalaby again introduces a woman who will make any sacrifice to provide for her children. His depiction of such strong female protagonists raises the issue of women's roles in Egyptian society, but the questions of moral choices and spiritual growth that are central for Gorky do not appear relevant for Shalaby's protagonists.

35 Khairy Shalaby, 'Akl al-'ayyāl', in Shalaby, *Ma laysa yadmunuhu ahadu: majmū'a qisaṣiya* (Cairo: Kātib al-yawm, 2019), pp. 141–48.

Maksim Gorky and Albert Cossery: Despair, Oppression, Rebels, and Objectified Women

Albert Cossery (in Arabic Albēr Quṣeyri) was a celebrated Franco-Egyptian writer, who referred to himself as "an Egyptian writer who writes in French".[36] Cossery's biography has been poorly studied because the author liked to surround himself with mutually contradictory rumours. We do know that he was born in Cairo, into a Christian family, presumably of Syro-Palestinian origin, and educated at a French school. At the age of eighteen, Cossery left Egypt and in the 1930s settled in Paris, where he spent the rest of his life. He wrote only eight books, all in French and all set in Cairo, as if he had never left his natal city.[37]

Two of Cossery's best-known works are *Men God Forgot* (*Les hommes oubliés de Dieu*, 1941), and *The House of Certain Death* (*La Maison de la mort certaine*, 1944). Interestingly, most of his books, including these two, have been translated into Arabic and even made into films in that language. The Egyptian journalist and writer Mahmud Qasim, who has translated four of his novels into Arabic, insists that Cossery is clearly an Arabic writer because, despite their original language, his novels abound in peculiarly Arab sentiments. Qasim even suggests they were written in Arabic and later translated into French.[38] Albert Cossery would make an interesting subject for Casanova's examination of the insecurities of Francophone Arab authors from the European periphery, which includes, from Algeria, the works of Kateb Yacine, Mouloud Feraoun, Mouloud Mammeri, and Rachid Boujedra. Casanova views their writing from a clearly Francocentric perspective, classifying them as "dominated and peripheral" and their writing style as "the general adoption of a narrative model that, in fact, only reproduced the French academic tradition of *belle écriture*".[39] This might be true if we look at Arabic literature through the prism of French culture, as Casanova does. However, her approach strips Arabic literature of its own rich heritage and conceals its complex interactions with other cultures and literatures, as Albert Cossery's case demonstrates.

36 Robyn Cresswell, 'Undelivered: Egyptian Novelists at Home and Abroad', *Harper's* (February 2011), 71–79 (p. 78).

37 Several researchers note that Cossery's written French included numerous idioms and terms that are more typical of the Arabic language. See, for instance, F. Lagrange, 'Albert Cossery écrit- il arabe?' in *Savants, amants, poètes et fous: Séances offertes à Katia Zakharia*, ed. by Catherine Pinon (Beyrouth: Presses de l'Ifpo, 2019), pp. 133–57. See also Cresswell, 'Undelivered'.

38 See Mahmud Qasim, *Al-adab al-'arabi al-maktūb bi-l-lugha al-'arabīya* [*Arab Literature Written in the French Language*] (Cairo: al-Hey'a al-miṣrīya al-'āmma li-l-kuttāb, 1996).

39 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by Malcolm DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 176, p. 343.

Nowhere in any interviews did Cossery ever mention Gorky, although he did admit that, as a youth, he had read Russian literature, especially the works of Dostoevsky.[40] However, other readers and critics have repeatedly emphasised the obvious influence of Gorky on some of Cossery's writings.[41] His friend, the novelist Henry Miller, wrote in his preface to Cossery's first collection of stories, *Men God Forgot*, that "he touches depths of despair, degradation and resignation which neither Gorky, nor Dostoyevsky has registered".[42] We should not be surprised that Cossery never publicly mentioned Gorky because, as even his biographer notes, Cossery was a hoaxer and a mystifier, and so his descriptive anecdotes can hardly be considered reliable sources of information.[43] Below, I will briefly outline the motifs and ideas from Cossery that appear to owe something either to Gorky's persona or his writings.

Rogues, Oppressors, and Revolutionaries

Like Shalaby, Cossery was clearly drawn to the lowest rungs of Egyptian society, and thus he chose rogues and criminals as the protagonists of almost all of his books. Often, Cossery uses the contrast between rich and poor, or the powerful and the helpless, to emphasise the dark side of life for Egyptian outcasts. In the collection *Men God Forgot*, the author introduces his readers to a gallery of impecunious characters, whose poverty and despair is comparable to that of Gorky's protagonists in *The Lower Depths*. In the story 'The Barber Killed his Wife' ('Le coiffeur a tué sa femme'), Chaktour, a poor, unemployed carpenter, explains to his young son that they are poor because God forgot about them. He adds that if God forgets about someone, this cannot be rectified. In the same story, Cossery introduces the policeman Goloche, who is described as a naturally cruel person with a glare like an angry beast, ready to kill any living creature. If we make allowances for Cossery's tendency to hyperbole, common in Arabic literary style, this mean-natured policeman from a Cairo slum will immediately call to mind the figure of Abram Medvedev, another cruel policeman, this time

40 Shaker Nouri, '"I do not like to talk in the present tense": Interview with Albert Cossery', *Banipal* 4 (1999), http://www.banipal.co.uk/selections/18/179/albert-cossery/.

41 See, for instance, John Taylor, 'Drooping Eyelids, a Farcical World (Albert Cossery)', in *Paths to Contemporary French Literature*, ed. by John Taylor, 3 vols (London and New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004–2011), III (2011), pp. 118–21; or Stephen Murray, 'More Albert Cossery fiction', *Japanese Culture Reflections Blog* (2017), https://japaneseculturereflectionsblog.wordpress.com/tag/albert-cossery/.

42 Reprinted as Henry Miller, 'The Novels of Albert Cossery', in Miller, *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird: Essays* (New York: New Direction Books, 1962), pp. 181–84 (p. 181).

43 Frédéric Andaru, *Monsieur Albert: Cossery, une vie* (Clichy: Editorial Éditions de Corlevour, 2013).

from *The Lower Depths*. Both Gorky and Cossery see these policemen, ostensibly meant to symbolise law and order, as elements of the lower depths, among those, as Cossery put it, forgotten by God. This juxtaposition of the rogues and vagabonds with more powerful individuals is also in line with the classical Arabic tradition I mentioned earlier, in which vagabonds and rogues are often given centre stage. Cossery's novel *The House of Certain Death* is set in one of the poorest Cairo neighbourhoods, where several families inhabit an old, extremely dilapidated house. In vain, they ask their landlord to repair it: nothing happens, and they keep living in misery. In this regard, their greedy landlord, Si Khalil is of special interest. Cossery used the image of the avaricious landlord again in *The House of Infamy* (*Les couleurs de l'infamie*, 1999). This cruel landlord figure echoes Kostylev from *The Lower Depths* and also Shalaby's Amm Shawadfi in *The Lodging House*. Toward the end of *The House of Certain Death*, Cossery openly calls for social change.

Clearly, both Cossery and Gorky share certain views. Gorky described these desperate situations without proffering solutions, while Cossery carefully describes them before unequivocally demanding change. The majority of both writers' protagonists live as if in a dream, but in key texts by each, one character becomes aware, in order to protest the existing, unjust order of things. This is, for instance, the case with Abdel Al from *The House of Certain Death*, or Serag in *Laziness in the Fertile Valley* (*Les fainéants dans la vallée fertile*, 1948). The Vlasovs, mother and son, from Gorky's *Mother* are the obvious Russian counterparts, or inspirations, for these Egyptian activists *malgré soi*. Interestingly, Mahmud Qasim terms the attitude of Cossery's protagonists "revolutionary" ("mawqif thawri"), which brings Cossery's writings ideologically even closer to Gorky's.[44] Despite the revolutionary sentiment typical of Cossery's writing, his female characters are undeveloped, and are always assigned secondary roles. Mahmud Qasim concludes bluntly that women in Cossery's novels are merely objectified.

Idleness that Leads to Death

As both Western and, more interestingly, Arab critics have emphasised, one of Cossery's central themes is laziness, or passivity. This is the lifestyle adopted by Cossery himself but is also, as Mahmud Qasim points out, a lifestyle typical of the poor, because efforts on their part generally are not justified by results. This suggests an interesting parallel with Gorky's depiction of those in the depths of society, who similarly inhabit a world without meaning or purpose. Throughout his writing career, Cossery was drawn to themes of death and dying; Gorky, too, often dwells in detail on his characters' deaths, such as those of Anna, Kostylev, and the Actor in *The Lower Depths*, and Natalia in *My Childhood*. It was obvious for Gorky that a meaningless, inert life inevitably leads to decay and

44 Mahmud Qasim, *Al-adab al-'arabi*, pp. 35–36.

an early death. Similarly, Cossery felt that living in everlasting hopelessness led to lethargic sleep (which is why so many of his characters sleep excessively) and, consequently, to death. *The House of Certain Death* derives its title from this theme: its characters inhabit a strange, unchanging world in a crumbling house which they can neither leave nor repair. The inevitable destruction of the house envisioned by its landlord at the very end of the novel stands for the metaphorical death of everything meaningless.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated some of the complex trajectories of influence followed by Maksim Gorky's writing in the Arab world, as well as the transformations of his ideas and persona facilitated by the translation of his books into Arabic. This has led to the emergence of a number of Arabic literary works demonstrably influenced both by Gorky's writings and the myths surrounding his personality. These trajectories are comparable, to some extent, to the global circulation of *The Thousand and One Nights*; their travels confirm Damrosch's contention that, once national literature is translated into a foreign language, it commences an independent life in the target culture. To describe the complex life of world literature, Damrosch uses the term "elliptical approach", where the original literary work and the reader's perception of the same work in translation represent two foci connected by an ellipse.[45] This image of numerous interconnected foci with overlapping ellipses reflects the interrelatedness of Gorky's legacy with the literary works of two Egyptian writers: Khairy Shalaby, who lived his whole life in Egypt and wrote in Arabic, and Albert Cossery, who left Egypt for France and wrote in French, but set all his novels in Cairo. Hence, Gorky's Arabic afterlife enjoyed, in Cossery's case, an even more convoluted trajectory: his influence extended to French and subsequently returned to Arabic via translations of Cossery's fiction.

Almost ninety years since his death, Gorky remains an influential writer, consistently retranslated and reprinted. Completely new translations have been produced by the Omani Ahmad ar-Rahbi and the Iraqi Munther Kathem Husseyn (e.g., the latter's version of *Tales from Italy* (*Skazki ob Italii*, 1923) published by the Lebanese publishing house ar-Rafideyn in 2018). In 2020, the same publishing house released Gorky's *The Spy: The Story of a Superfluous Man* (*Shpion: Zhizn' nenuzhnogo cheloveka*, 1910) in a translation by Ayman Ibn Masbah al-Uwaisi, from Oman. New and old Arabic translations of Gorky's works continue to be downloaded from free online libraries and reviewed by Arab readers. As of late 2023, *The Lower Depths* had been rated 3,428 times and reviewed 139 times, *Selected Works* had been rated 6,921 times with 391 reviews, and *Mother* had been

45 Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, p. 133.

rated 16,490 times.[46] Moreover, adaptations of Gorky's plays remain popular in Arab theatres: for instance, in 2017 *The Lower Depths* was performed four times by a Palestinian student cast with the 'ASHTAR' Theatre in the West Bank city of Ramallah. Gorky's importance as an intellectual and cultural inspiration to the Arab world persists in the twenty-first century.

46 For these specific statistics, see: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/13493339 and https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/15729096 respectively. Both pages are in Arabic.