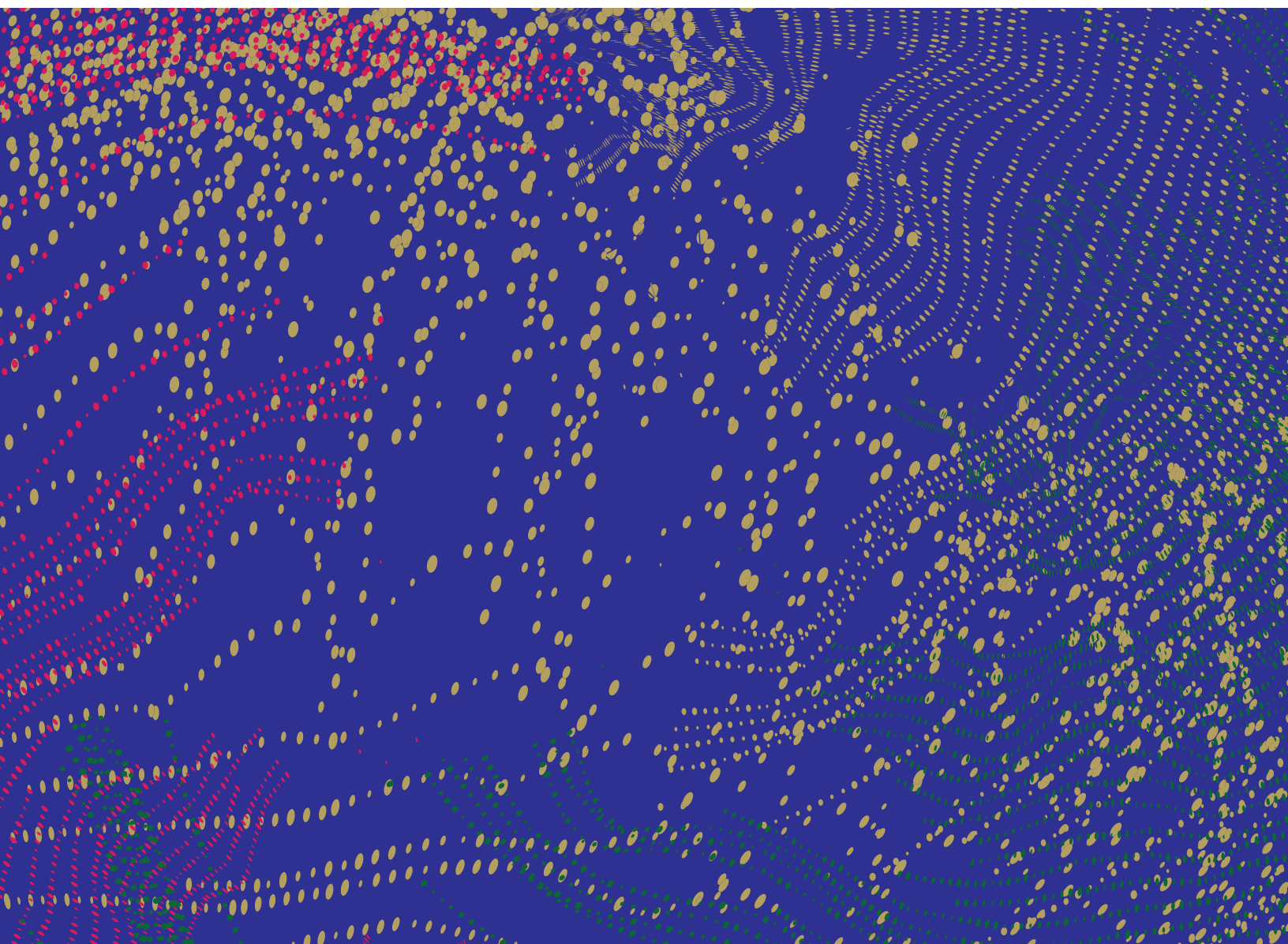


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Traveling Theory in Translation: An Arab “Travelogue” of Feminism and Gender

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When literary scholar Edward Said wrote in his chapter on “Traveling Theory” that “ideas and theories travel—from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another,” little was he aware that his own notion of theories and concepts traveling across place and time would become a traveling theory in its own right.¹ This essay starts by pointing out Said’s traveling theory paradigm before briefly reflecting on the journeys of the notion of traveling theory and its development in various temporal and geographical locations. Yet the main focus here is on the Arab world, with particular attention paid to the travels of feminism and gender via translation.

Said was interested in the transportation of ideas, and he was particularly concerned with their transformation in the process and their influence on cross-cultural translocation. He identifies a four-stage paradigm of the motion of theories and ideas, specifically the movement of literary and cultural theory: (1) the “point of origin,” (2) the “passage,” (3) the accompanying “conditions,” and (4) the theory’s or concept’s “new position in a new time and place.”² He argues that as ideas and theories travel across time and place, they undergo development and change. As a traveling theory in its own right, his notion of traveling theory has had its own journey, where it originated in his theorizing in his framework of the humanities, passed into other critical spaces such as the social sciences, and then underwent various conditions of acceptance, until being accommodated and incorporated in its new position.

Said’s theory has traveled from its original academic location in the United States and his cultural origins in the Arab region across the globe and across the humanities and social sciences. As a theoretical framework, it has moved from literary criticism to postcolonialism to postsocialism; from critical theory to the study of culture and the analysis of concepts; from literature to language, rhetoric, and narratology; and from feminism to translation practice—to name a few

¹ Edward W. Said, “Traveling Theory,” in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 226.

² Said, “Traveling Theory,” 226–27.

examples.³ Much research on the connection of critical theory to feminism and gender has acknowledged traveling theory as a frame of reference, especially in relation to translation: in the work of Margara Millan on the globalization of feminism and gender in Latin America via translation, in Min Dongchao’s book on feminism and translation in China, and in Luise von Flotow’s contributions to transnational feminist translation theory and practice.⁴ This essay is informed by all these journeys and terrains but is focused on the Arab world as a region, feminism and gender studies as a discipline, and translation as a medium.

Translating Feminism and Gender in the Arab World

Feminism emerged around the turn of the twentieth century as “a doctrine of equal rights for women” that takes the form of a social movement and “an ideology of social transformation aiming to create a world for women beyond simple social equality.”⁵ Marilyn Frye described feminism as a theory, stating that it can be understood as both theory and social movement, grounded in both ideology and praxis.⁶ Feminism is a traveling theory and a global phenomenon with its various ideological and social representations. As a sociopolitical phenomenon, we cannot identify one specific part of the world or point in time where it originated, but we find traces of feminist thought and practices across history and geography. Nor has it taken a one-way route from the East

³ See Mike Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), on traveling concepts from a comparative perspective. See Radim Hladik, “A Theory’s Travelogue: Post-Colonial Theory in Post-Socialist Space,” *Teorie Vedy/Theory of Science* 33 (2011): 561–90, and Magdalena Nowicka, “Travelling Theory: The Legacy of Edward W. Said in Eastern Europe,” in *La traduction des voix de la theorie/Translating the Voices of Theory*, ed. Isabelle Genin and Ida Klitgard (Montreal: Editions quebecoises de l’oeuvre, collection Vita Traductiva, 2015), 223–51, on postcolonialism and postcommunist Eastern Europe. On traveling theory and cultural studies in Africa, see James Ogude, “Whose Africa? Whose Culture? Reflections on Agency, Travelling Theory and Cultural Studies in Africa,” *Kunapipi* 34, no. 1 (2012): 12–27, <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol34/iss1/3>.

⁴ Margara Millan, “The Traveling of ‘Gender’ and Its Accompanying Baggage: Thoughts on the Translation of Feminism(s), the Globalization of Discourses, and Representational Divides,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 23, no. 1 (2016): 6–27; Min Dongchao, *Translation and Travelling Theory: Feminist Theory and Praxis in China* (London: Routledge, 2017); Luise von Flotow and Farzaneh Farahzad, eds., *Translating Women: Different Voices and New Horizons* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Luise von Flotow and Hala Kamal, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Translation, Feminism and Gender* (London: Routledge, 2020).

⁵ Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990), 74.

⁶ Marilyn Frye, “Feminism,” in *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*, ed. Lorraine Code (London: Routledge, 2000), 195.

to the West. Feminism has roots in most cultures, and it is only with feminist theorizing in the past few decades that these local historical feminisms have been brought to light. Feminism’s journeys have left their marks, expanding the initially conceived singular feminist theory to feminist theories and a singular feminism to feminisms.

Unlike feminism, which emerged in different locations before moving on, gender is a traveling concept that originated in contemporary Western theory and practice and then moved across disciplines, cultures, and languages. Though generally considered a tool of feminist inquiry, some feminist scholars, such as Greta Olson, caution against the third wave of feminism’s shift to gender. She offers a critique of the concept of gender, as “a critical concept, a theory of identity difference, and as an object of study,” which has in her view “displaced” the category of woman and subsumed feminism under “the supposedly more inclusive theory of gender.”⁷ Another similar perspective is offered by Millán, who examines UN and nongovernmental organization development projects in Latin America:

Gender as a field of knowledge comes from the North. This does not mean that in other contexts and localities there has not been knowledge about what the word gender designates, that gender order or negotiations of it were not an ongoing reality. Still, it was (and continues to be) through the term gender that “new” and even subversive knowledge representing various significant “turns” travels from scholarly feminism(s) to political policies and official academic institutionalization.⁸

Millán’s approach looks at the problematics of translatability, pointing out the tendency of academics to find equivalents or derivatives in translating the term “gender,” while activists opt for transliterating the word—a case applicable to the Arab world. Such critiques of the journeys of gender as a concept suggest that unlike feminism, which remains closely connected to scholarly discourses and histories of women’s activism, gender has been appropriated by international organizations and development projects, masquerading as an inclusive term.

Extending Said’s traveling theory to the Arab world, Hoda Elsadda investigates “the feminist anti-imperialist critique of rights discourses, particularly when used as a theoretical lens to understand or evaluate women’s rights movements, or gender related campaigns for justice in non-democratic settings.”

⁷ Greta Olson, “Gender as a Travelling Concept: A Feminist Perspective,” in *Travelling Concepts for the Study of Culture*, ed. Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nunning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 214.

⁸ Millán, “The Traveling of ‘Gender,’” 17.

Using Said's paradigm, Elsadda is specifically concerned with the effects of the processes of cultural transmission and translocation in terms of circulation, interpretation, integration, and appropriation, thus leading to transformation.⁹ As a case in point, she uses the work of Egyptian human rights organizations on violence against women, particularly sexual violence, where the exposure of violations and assaults against women also involves state transgressions against women political protesters. In this case, it is a process that involves several parties, such as international human rights discourses, Arab societies, and state apparatuses, where Arab rights activists find themselves engaging with these and other

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forces. I offer observations on the journey of feminism and gender in the Arab world and argue that translation plays a crucial role of mediation in the transportation and transformation of feminist and gender discourses.

The term "gender" started circulating in the

Arab world in the early 1990s via UN documents and can be specifically traced back to the UN Commission on Population and Development Conference held in Cairo in 1994. It was accompanied by the translation of the term into Arabic as *al-naw' al-ijtimā'i* (the social kind/type), which soon gained dominance in Arabic-speaking development circles. When the term "gender" entered academia, however, it did so as a concept. One of the earliest uses of the term and concept in Arabic was Hoda Elsadda's explanatory translation of gender as "the socio-cultural construction of sex" (*al-tashkīl al-thaqāfi wa al-ijtimā'i lil-jins*), which she followed with the English word. In 1999, a group of Arab scholars at the American University in Cairo (AUC) coined a new term, *al-jinūsa*, as a preferred translation of "gender."¹⁰ Thus, within a decade of its circulation, the journey of "gender" into the Arab world resulted in at least three variants in translation. Interestingly, the new millennium witnessed the use of gender in

⁹ Hoda Elsadda, "Travelling Critique: Anti-Imperialism, Gender and Rights Discourses," *Feminist Dissent* 3 (2018): 91, 92.

¹⁰ For more on *al-jinūsa* as a translation of gender, see "Gender and Knowledge: Contribution of Gender Perspectives to Intellectual Formations," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 19 (1999): 6–7. For more on the translation of gender into Arabic, see Samia Mehrez, "Translating Gender," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3, no. 1 (2007): 106–27.

transliteration, with various derivatives. Thus, *al-jender* is gaining momentum, especially among younger generations of Arab feminists, who grew up understanding the concept. Currently, the term/concept “gender” tends to appear as *al-jender* in the speech and writings of independent feminists and those working in feminist organizations; *al-naw’ al-ijtimā’i* now mostly appears as *al-naw’* in the discourses of international development organizations, in official state documents, and by people in the social sciences.¹¹

Feminism cannot be considered a typical traveling concept in Said’s terms, as it does not seem to have originated and spread from a fixed time and place. From the early twentieth century, “feminism” has been used in the Arab women’s press, where it also appears accompanied by affiliated words, such as *al-niswiya* (feminism), *al-nisā’iya* (women’s), *al-nisā’* (women), and *al-mar’a* (woman). One of the earliest uses of the concept can be found, for example, in a program of the *Al-ittihād al-nisā’i al-misri* (The Egyptian Women’s Union, 1923), which includes a section titled *Al-qism al-niswi* (The Feminist Section). The distinction between *al-nisā’i* (women’s) and *al-niswi* (feminist) reflects Arab women’s awareness of the difference between a women’s organization and its feminist agenda, respectively—a distinction that prevails in contemporary feminist discourses based on the history of the term/concept in the Arab world, rather than its simple importation from Western theory. Thus, unlike “gender,” which has traveled to the Arab world and received various translations based on its cultural context, Arab feminism, which has traveled outward and inward across history and geography, has its origins as concept and ideology in the Arab world. Consequently, “feminism” as used in Arabic has not undergone terminological modification or replacement, despite its encounters with Western feminist theory. In that sense, Arab feminism can be seen as having appropriated Western feminist theory, unlike gender, which remains unfixed and unrooted in the Arab world.

Another interesting example can be found in the translation into Arabic of the terms “LGBTQI+” and “queer.” The concepts of LGBTQI have had their equivalents in Arabic language and culture but developed culturally negative connotations and are rejected by the Arab LGBTQI community as pejorative. The community itself has developed alternative terms through their communication fora. The two terms currently used and propagated via LGBTQI+ social networks are *queer* and *mujtama’ al-meem*. The former is a transliteration of the English word and is mostly used in reference to queer theory; *mujtama’ al-meem* literally means the “M community.” The letter in roman (*meem* in Arabic)

¹¹ *The Gender Dictionary*, published by the Civil Society Knowledge Center in Lebanon, uses the two terms *al-naw’ al-ijtima’i* and *al-jender* as synonymous translations of the term “gender.” See <https://civilsociety-centre.org/gen-dictionary/g/34520>.

stands for the initial letter in the Arabic translation of the initials used in the English acronym LGBT (*mithli, mithliya, muzdawaj, muzdawaja, mutahawwil, mutahawwila*).¹² “LGBT” has thus taken a different trajectory than “gender” and “feminism” in the Arab world. Like “feminism,” it has its own cultural history, though the original Arabic terms have been replaced with newer ones, derived from the English. Yet in this case, the original Arabic form carries pejorative implications; the imported English word “feminist,” used as a noun or adjective in spoken or written Arabic transliteration, often carries pejorative implications. Although “feminism” and “queer” seem to have developed their settled Arabic forms, “gender” remains unfixed.

Feminist Agency in Translation Praxis

One of the main features of feminist activism in the Arab world is its civil society location and its rights discourses, where translations from and to Arabic significantly affect the circulation and transformation of feminism as theory and gender as a critical concept and analytical tool.¹³ Here I examine the Women and Memory Forum (WMF) in Egypt as a cultural site where feminism and gender have been received and developed in the Arab context.¹⁴ In particular, as part of the WMF, the Women and Memory Feminist Translations Project (Tarjamat Niswiya) developed over ten years (2006–16) and led to the publication of seven interdisciplinary volumes at the intersections of feminism and gender with political science, religious studies, history, psychoanalysis, sociology and anthropology, literary criticism, and sexuality studies.¹⁵ This project

¹² One of the most reliable resources on the LGBTQI+ community in the Arab world can be found in the WikiGender at https://genderiyya.xyz/wiki/مجتمع_الميم

¹³ Feminist and human rights organizations are engaged in the production of rights discourses in English and Arabic, if not directly in their publications then indirectly and continually through their websites, where significant efforts are made in generating knowledge about the Arab world in English through translation.

¹⁴ Founded in 1995, the WMF is an Egyptian independent feminist research center, working toward producing feminist knowledge in Arabic by rereading and rewriting Egyptian, Arab, and Islamic history, using feminist theories, and developing feminist research methodologies. For more on WMF, visit <http://www.wmf.org.eg/en/projects/>.

¹⁵ The seven readers are *Gender and Political Science*, ed. Mervat Hatem, trans. Shohrat El-Alem (2010); *Feminism and Religious Studies*, ed. Omaima Abou-Bakr, trans. Randa Aboubakr (2012); *Feminism and Historical Studies*, ed. Hoda Elsadda, trans. Abir Abbas (2015); *Gender and the Social Sciences*, ed. Hania Sholkamy, trans. Seham Abdel-Salam (2015); *Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. and trans. Hala Kamal (2015); *Women and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Afaf Mahfouz, trans. Aida Seif el-Dawla (2016); and *Feminism and Sexuality*, ed. Hala Kamal and Aya Sami, trans. Aida Seif el-Dawla (2016).

emerged as a manifestation of scholactivism.¹⁶ Its aims are to give Arab scholars and activists access to contemporary and state-of-the-art feminist scholarship and to encourage Arab interaction with international feminist research. It is informed by feminist translation theory, which includes a view of translation as an act of feminist intervention, and of the translator as feminist activist.¹⁷

The translation process raised several issues among the editors and translators. One of the first questions addressed a methodological concern in selecting the articles for the readers, reflected in the titles of the volumes, namely, whether the collections would follow a feminist or a gender approach. After several discussions and considerations of the material, the decision was made to allow variety and to give each editor the choice. The result

The feminist translation process does not simply relocate feminist theory into Arabic language and discourse. It is a journey that transforms Western theory during its passage, as it also produces feminist theory and knowledge in Arabic.

was that the readers grounded in the humanities were informed by feminist theories, while those in the social sciences were more influenced by gender-oriented approaches, except for the volume on psychoanalysis, which foregrounded womanhood as a central category. The translators raised another crucial issue related to the translation of terminology: the translation of “gender” and its derivatives into Arabic. Again, after group discussions, the decision was made to allow for variation rather than imposing a fixed translation. It was further agreed that editors would write introductions to their volumes, and every translator would explain her strategies in a translator’s note, where the issue of translating “gender” would be directly addressed.¹⁸

When we look at the Women and Memory Feminist Translations Project, Said’s four-stage paradigm of traveling theories—origin, passage, context,

¹⁶ The term “scholactivism” was coined by eco-activist scholars to describe the Feminist Translations Project. See Hala Kamal, “‘Scholactivism’: Feminist Translation as Knowledge Production for Social Change,” in *Bounded Knowledge: Doctoral Studies in Egypt*, ed. Daniele Cantini (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2020), 183–202.

¹⁷ To the best of my knowledge, Luise von Flotow was the first scholar to argue for translation as a form of feminist activism, as she states that “the feminist translator can dare to be a resistant, aggressive and creative writer” (Luise von Flotow, “Feminist Translation: Contexts, Practices and Theories,” *TTR: Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction* 4, no. 2 [1991]: 81), reinforced by her notion of “interventionist translation” when “feminist translators intervene in a text for political reasons” (Luise von Flotow, *Translation and Gender: Translating in the “Era of Feminism”* [Manchester: St. Jerome, 1997], 25).

¹⁸ A detailed explanation of the translation strategies can be found in Kamal, “‘Scholactivism.’”

and new position—we see that feminism and gender as theoretical terms and concepts have traveled not only across cultures, languages, and discourses but also between academia and civil society. More concretely, the translated texts, most of which originated in Western (Anglo-American) academia, have been translocated through a process of careful selection and translation, mediated by Arab (Egyptian) editors and translators—feminist scholars and specialists serving an activist agenda. The feminist translation process does not simply relocate feminist theory into Arabic language and discourse. It is a journey that transforms Western theory during its passage, as it also produces feminist theory and knowledge in Arabic. The new position occupied by the seven volumes in translation becomes a site of intersecting scholarship and activism and a manifestation of how academics can play a direct role in social justice—specifically gender justice—through translation.

Conclusion

In this brief travelogue of feminism and gender in the Arab world, I have argued the following: Said’s four-stage paradigm of traveling theory remains significant to the conceptualization of translation of feminism and gender in general and to the Arab world in particular, where translation has been historically used in the service of ideology—whether nationalism, socialism, feminism, or human rights, among others. Second, “feminism,” “gender,” and “queer,” as terms and concepts, have traveled from their points of origins within and across the Arab world, mediated through translation in journeys marked by translocation and transformation. Third, translation praxis in the context of civil society—rights politics and discourses in the Arab world emerges as scholactivism, combining specifically feminist scholarship and activism, as manifested in the case of the WMF Feminist Translations Project. Consequently, civil society (represented by WMF) acts as a site of knowledge production, and a space that as much as it introduces feminist thought to academic work also injects feminist activism with scholarship, traveling across scholarship and activism and beyond academia and civil society. Finally, translation is not merely an act of transferring knowledge from one language and culture to another; it involves processes of cultural mediation and political agency. Although it might be too early to evaluate the power of translation in transforming knowledge, it manifests itself as a significant player in producing feminist knowledge and generating an Arab feminist discourse.

In conclusion, theories, concepts, and ideas are marked by their journeys,

similar to the process of translation itself, where a word is transformed when it moves across linguistic, social, and cultural contexts. The process is also problematized, as gender-related theories and concepts have been traveling into, across, and beyond the Arab world. Feminism and gender have undergone various journeys of this sort, asserting Arab contributions to the transfer and production of knowledge, manifested in the circulation and coinage of concepts and terms. It has never been a one-way journey from West to East or North to South. On the contrary, feminism, gender, and their sister concepts have developed hybrid transnational and transdisciplinary meanings that are rethought, reworked, and reshaped through their journeys.

Hala Kamal is a professor of gender studies in the Department of English Language and Literature, Cairo University, Egypt. Her research interests and publications in both Arabic and English are in the areas of women and gender studies, translation studies, autobiography studies, and the history of the Egyptian feminist movement. She has translated several books on gender and feminism into Arabic. Her latest publications related to translation studies include “Virginia Woolf in Arabic: A Feminist Paratextual Reading of Translation Strategies” (2021); “‘Scholactivism’: Feminist Translation as Knowledge Production for Social Change” (2021); and coediting with Luise von Flotow *The Routledge Handbook of Translation, Feminism and Gender* (2020).