Translating Cultures in Search of Human Universals

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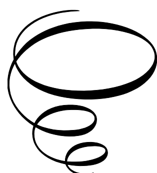
Edited by

Ikram Ahmed Elsherif

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-6306-5
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-6306-3

To Professor Nawal El-Degwi

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the administration of the October University for Modern Sciences and Arts (MSA) for their unceasing support and sponsorship without which this book would not have been produced. A special note of appreciation is due to Professor Nawal El-Degwi, Head of the Board of Trustees, whose commitment to academic excellence is an inspiration.

My deep gratitude also goes to my colleagues in the Faculty of Languages and the Research and Conference Committee for their support and assistance, with a special note of thanks to Dr. Olfat Nour El Din for her invaluable assistance.

INTRODUCTION

The Native-American novelist D'Arcy McNickle in his novel, *Wind from an Enemy Sky*, writes, "the words men speak never passed from one language to another without some loss of flavor and ultimate meaning;"[1] and to this he ascribes the failure of communication between his white and Native-American characters because, with the loss of flavor and meaning, it becomes "difficult" to "translate from one man's life into another's."[2] Simple and few as McNickle's words are, they open up wide vistas for contemplation about language, culture and human communication and relations. Language as a means of self and cultural expression is key in communication between groups who speak the same language, while translation is key to communication between human groups who speak different languages. However, while it might be relatively easy to translate words from one language into another, translating the wealth of cultural meanings encoded in these words might prove more difficult, hence the difficulty in translating from one man's *life* into another's, and the potential difficulty of mutual communication and understanding. Yet, what is captivating in McNickle's words is the implied hope, for translating "life", and making it understandable and palatable to the other, might be difficult, but not impossible.

Translating "from one man's life into another's" and recognizing, understanding and accepting that life with all its difference and uniqueness might be made possible if the human universals of the human condition and human nature are recognized and acknowledged. Human universals, "of which hundreds", according to anthropologist Donald E. Brown, "have been identified,"[3] are "those empirically determined features of culture, society, language, behavior and psyche found in all ethnographically or historically recorded human societies."[4] Though human universals have sometimes

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[1] D'Arcy McNicle, *Wind from and Enemy Sky* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 2.
[2] Ibid., 26.
[3] Donald E. Brown, "Human Universals, Human Nature & Human Culture," *Daedalus* 33, no. 4, *On Human Nature* (Fall 1995): 47.
[4] Donald E. Brown, "Human Universals and their Implications." In *Being Humans: Anthropological Universality and Particularity in Transdisciplinary Perspectives*,

stood suspect as "over generalized facets of Western life" and at other times dismissed in favor of "postcolonial respect for difference,"[5] there is strong empirical evidence that they do exist and that their existence and cultural variation are not mutually exclusive. They thus testify to the similarity in human condition and nature which can be a basis for cross-cultural identification and understanding.

Carl G. Jung in *Man and His Symbols* argues that human beings have developed throughout their evolutionary history a "collective unconscious" and "collective thought patterns of the mind" which are "innate and inherited" and which are "recognizably the same all over the earth."[6] This collective unconscious, he explains in *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, is "a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals… It consists of pre-existing forms, the archetypes,"[7] or "primordial images." However, though these archetypes are "identical", they might "vary a great deal without losing their basic pattern", and "reproduce themselves in any time or in any part of the world."[8] Recent developments in the fields of evolutionary biology, cognitive psychology and evolutionary psychology, according to Theodore R. Schatzki validate Jung's theory: "because of a shared evolutionary past, humans possess an identical modular mind, whose components are responsible for universal as well as variable behaviors and features of social life."[9] Kiwasi Wiredu advances a similar argument:

> because of elements of instinct we can be sure of certain species-distinctive uniformity in human actions and reactions. But because of the element of culture, that is, of habit, instruction, and conscious thought, there will naturally be plenty of room for variation. The first consideration accounts for the possibility of objectivity and universality in the standards of thought

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ed. Neil Roughley (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter Gmbh & Co., 2000), 156.

[5] Theodore R. Schatzki, "Human Universals and Understanding a Different Socioculture," *Human Studies* 26, no. 1 (2003): 1.

[6] Carl G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (New York and London: Anchor Press, 1964), 75.

[7] Carl G. Jung, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung, vol. 9 (part 1): Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, eds. Alder Gerhard and Hull R. F. C (Princeton University Press, 1969), 43.

[8] Jung, *Man and his Symbols*, 67-69.

[9] Schatzki, 2.

> and action in our species, the second for the various degrees of relativity and subjectivity.[10]

Asserting that "cultural variation" does not exclude "cognitive universality,"[11] Michelle Scalise Sugiyama in "Cultural Variation Is Part of Human Nature" elaborates on the previous arguments. She explains that human beings throughout their evolutionary history have encountered adaptive problems of survival (human condition) and have developed cognitive and psychological solutions (human nature) to address these problems. She contends that "the adaptive problems and their cognitive solutions are constant across cultures." The human condition and human nature are therefore fundamentally similar. However, "what varies between cultures is habitat and historical happenstance," and in response to different environments and historical experiences cognitive processes become "context-sensitive," generating "different psychological and behavioral outputs to different inputs," sometimes even within the same culture group if its members are largely dispersed in time and locale.[12] "Context-sensitivity" is thus experienced as cultural variation, yet this variation is merely a "local" response to a universal adaptive problem or need, or to borrow again from Jung, a "representation … of a motif"[13] that varies a great deal without losing its basic or fundamental pattern.

If human condition and human nature are fundamentally identical, then communication, understanding and empathy ought to be possible even given the contingent, context-sensitive variations in culture. Since one of the basic human universals is language, and since humans, as Sugiyama expresses it, "use words to create a facsimile of their environment,"[14] and to communicate their feelings, beliefs, needs and concerns, this book is an exploration, a venture into world literature "In Search of Human Universals" underlying, and often overshadowed by, obvious surface differences with the aim of "Translating Cultures". Yet the aim is not a linguistic translation from one language into another, but a cultural translation that explores how human universals transfer and echo into different cultures and can be a step towards both understanding of difference and recognition of similarity in

[10] Kiwasi Wiredu, "Are There Cultural Universals?" *The Monist* 78, no. 1 (1995): 53.
[11] Michelle Scalise Sugiyama, "Cultural Variation Is Part of Human Nature: Literary Universal, Context Sensitivity, and 'Shakespeare in the Bush'," *Human Nature* 14, no. 4 (2003): 384.
[12] Ibid., 385.
[13] Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, 67.
[14] Sugiyama, 385.

human experience. The book explores Cultural, social, behavioral and linguistic human universals identified by Donald E. Brown, including myth, folklore and ritual; social groups, kinship systems, ethnocentrism, group identification/identity, self and other, and gender; language, communication and ideology.

The book is divided into Five Parts, each consisting of two chapters exploring one or more shared human universals. In Part One, “Heroes Across Cultures”, the authors cross time and space boundaries, from Medieval to modern times, from England to Egypt and from Denmark to India to explore variations in the representation of the Hero figure in different cultures. Ikram Ahmed Elsherif in chapter one, “Slayers of the Ogre”, employs anthropological theory and the “Robin Hood Principle” to glean out the similarities and differences in the representation of the universal phenomenon of the outlaw hero who is “generated” and celebrated in different oral traditions and folklores. Focusing on the figure of the English Robin Hood and his Egyptian counterpart, Yasin, she argues that both outlaw heroes are “social bandits” created by popular and/or fictional imagination in response to social oppression to express the universal need of the downtrodden for a champion. Elsherif contends that the similarity between the twelfth century English Robin Hood and the twentieth century Egyptian Yasin “stand as testimony not only for the human need for a hero, a champion who seeks justice and truth for the poor and the oppressed, but also for the fact that this human need is both timeless and universal.” In Chapter Two, “From Denmark to India”, Olfat Nour El Din, building on Yuri M. Lotman’s semiotic approach to cultural studies, investigates what she calls “the universal phenomenon of Hamletism” in Vishal Bhardwaj’s film *Haider*. The film is a cinematic appropriation and translation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* which shifts the Danish setting to a Kashmiri milieu and the royal feud to a political conflict. She argues that Bhardwaji’s reconstruction of Hamlet comes as a response to globalization where the local co-exists with the global, creating a “glocal” space where cultural exchange and translation takes place.

In Part Two, “Myth and Ritual for Survival”, the authors investigate the functions of myth and ritual and their deployment in different cultures and time periods. In Chapter One, “Revisiting Yaqui Mythology through Character Archetypes in Luis Valdez’s *Mummified Deer*”, Amani Wagih takes us to the Chicano world of myth and ritual and employs Carl Jung’s theory of Archetypes and Joseph Campbell’s definition of myth to analyze Valdez’s play. She argues that Valdez employs the storytelling tradition, utilizes and manipulates the ancient myth and ritual of the deer dance, and even twists archetypal patterns to revive his modern Yaqui people’s sense

of pride in their identity and heritage. She points out that the myth and ritual which sustained the Yaqui people throughout their ancient history, can still have the power in modern times and in foreign lands to bring them to "a unified whole" capable of confronting oppression and othering. A thread of Wagih's argument extends into Chapter Two, Amal Mazhar's "Performing Rituals and Orality as Tools of Consolidation/Subversion of Traditions". Adopting Victor Turner's views on drama and anthropology, Mazhar investigates the deployment of rituals and orality in *Death and the King's Horseman*, by the African dramatist Wole Soyinka, and *The Southerner*, by the Egyptian dramatist Shazly Farah. She argues that the two writers "remold" and use the rituals and oral traditions of their respective cultures "in order to perform functions that might not have been initially connected with such rituals." Soyinka uses ritual and orality to consolidate and reassert the Yoruba cultural values, while Farah uses ritual and orality to revisit and revise dysfunctional social traditions. Wagih and Mazhar's analyses and interpretations of three different writers from three different cultures confirm not only the universality of myths and rituals, but also that they served and still serve an important function of social and psychological survival.

Self and Other, identity, ethnocentrism and self-determination are universal concerns which are tackled in Part Three, "Self and Other (Postcolonial Challenges)". In Chapter One, "Retranslating Environmental Ethics", Heba El-Abbadi explores these issues from a somewhat novel perspective. Reading Nicholas Ellenbogen's plays *Horn of Sorrow* and *Guardians of Eden,* she employs Paul Driessen's "Eco-Imperialism" to approach African ethnocentric need of self-determination, within a postcolonial context, from an ethical standpoint. She argues that the two plays condemn the West's control of African natural resources under the pretext of ethical ideologies. The West, which proclaimed themselves "self-appointed guardians of the public weal," place bans on hunting rhinoceroses and elephants as endangered species, which results in the impoverishment of African villagers who depend on these animals for survival. The "eco-centric" bans ignore the needs of the African villagers and their right to live in harmony and interdependence with their environment as they had done for centuries before European colonization. El-Abbadi asserts that Ellenbogen demonstrates in the plays that what would be really ethical is for the West not to impose foreign ideologies and laws, but to "recognize" that Africans' "common cause is poverty and that their common cause is survival," a cause that all humanity can identify with and understand. Thus what he calls for is "interdependence of species as a means of conservation" that would grant Africans self-determination and survival. Nada Zeyada in Chapter Two,

"From Monocultural Domination to Multicultural Amalgamation", takes up similar issues of ethnic identification and needs, imposition of ideology and identity, but on the individual level. She explores notions of ethnic identity in the novel *White Teeth*, by the Jamaican-British writer Zadie Smith, where "polarization between the monolithic power of the British empire and the plural society of contemporary London parallels the changes that befell the identity of the colonized" as they transitioned from being marginal colonial subjects to being residents in the host country of Britain. Examining the identity crises of the different ethnic characters in the novel, Zeyada concludes that in their quest for a definite identity and group belonging, they, like most "ex-colonial subjects" are constantly striving to "decipher the enigma" of their existence and find "a definite meaning for their formless identity."

The imposition of power and ideology and the threat they pose for the integrity of human communication and for human survival is a thread which is interwoven in the thematic concerns of Part Four. In this part, "Translating Ideology", language, literature and translation as vehicles for the expression and dissemination of ideology are explored. In the first chapter, "The Nexus of Narrativity and Ideology in *The Leisure of an Egyptian Official* and Its Arabic Translation", Heba Aref compares and contrasts the English source text *The Leisure of an Egyptian Official*, an autobiographical narrative of Lord Edward Cecil (1921), and its Arabic translation, *Memoir of the Late Lord Edward Cecil* (1922), by the Egyptian journalist Mohamed Et-tab'i. She argues that though the author of the source text claimed that his narrative was not intended for the public eye, but only for the entertainment of his family and friends, it in reality sought "to disseminate publicly a narrative that can be indirectly digested as justifying the power differential between the British colonizer and the colonized Egyptians." El-Tab'i's, translation, however, had a different and conflicting purpose. Et-tab'i translated only those parts of the source text which served his purpose "to expose the imperial ideology disguised in a seemingly humorous entertaining sequence of events" and to resist colonial imposition of power. The interconnectedness of language, translation, power and ideology which Aref demonstrates in her analysis is taken up by Mahmoud H. ElSherif in the second chapter, "Impact of Biased/Neutral Media Discourse on Conflict Mitigation". Focusing on Media discourse, terminology and their translation, ElSherif maintains that "power and media coverage are key elements in tackling the impact of news discourse on agitating/mitigating conflict." The choice of words and linguistic structures and their translation in media is often ideological, which may result in agitating conflicts. This can be avoided if peace media or peace journalism

is adopted for media discourse to remain aloof and neutral. Both Aref and ElSherif bring to the limelight the profound importance and significance of language as a universal tool that can be used or abused in communication.

Part Five, "Trauma and Dreams" deals with two universals of the human psyche. Trauma and dreams affect individuals and groups and their variations and representations in literature reflect significant social and cultural ideologies and practices. In Chapter One, "A Pattern of Female PTSD", Hiba Bushiha asserts that in critical and fictional literature depicting war victims suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, women and their traumas have been marginalized because the traditional focus is always on soldiers and their war traumas. She applies William Niederland's theory of "survival syndrome" to trace a pattern of female PTSD in Victor Fleming's cinematic adaptation of *Gone with the Wind* and Vera Brittain's memoir *Testament of Youth.* She argues that though women may experience war differently from men because of traditional gender roles, the effects of war on their psyche and social life are similar. Like trauma and its effects, dreams are a collective experience shared by all human beings. In Chapter Two, "Translating Split Selves in Mahfouz's *I Saw in My Dreams*, Manar El-Wahsh uses cognitive psychology and cognitive poetics to examine the phenomenon of "split Self" in Mahfouz's collection of short stories *I Saw on my Dreams* and to uncover their metaphorical and cultural meanings.

"Translating Cultures" is thus a collection of articles by a group of Egyptian scholars who explore the representation of core human universals in a variety of creative and literary production from almost every corner of the globe. Taking their own Middle Eastern milieu as a springboard, a number of them conduct comparisons between Egyptian and British and African literary works, exploring how universal myths, folklore and oral traditions may translate similarly or differently between cultures. Others employ their unique perspective to investigate and comprehend how other similar features of human culture and concerns are portrayed in different cultures. Thus they take us in journeys of exploration of Chicano myth and identity, Indian appropriation of Hamlet, Jamaican-British conceptualization of identity, African struggles against eco-imperialism, Egyptian interpretation of dreams, and the much marginalized women's PSTD. Others still explore how meaning is formed and transformed by political and social ideology which spills out into the language of literary and media translation.

The uniqueness of "Translating Cultures" stems not only from the unique vantage point of the contributors, but also from the variety of genres and the different cultures they explore, the different time periods of the literary productions explored, and the different approaches and theories employed in the discussions and analyses. The different articles tackle

fiction, drama, cinema adaptations of literary works, autobiography, translation and media language and coverage. They cover works produced from as far back as the twelfth century to the contemporary period, and they employ anthropology, cultural theory, post-colonial theory, translation theory, psychology and psychoanalysis, environmentalism, semiotics, and cognitive poetics to offer a multi-faceted, multi-layered view of a human experience that though may seem different to the undiscerning eye, is in reality shared across cultures. It is this shared human experience that "Translating Cultures" seeks to bring to the fore as a basis for inter- and intra-cultural communication and consolidation, bridging gaps of misinformation/miscommunication both spatial (between different/distant cultures) and temporal (between different generations within the same culture).

PART ONE:

HEROES ACROSS CULTURES

CHAPTER ONE

SLAYERS OF THE OGRE: ROBIN HOOD AND YASIN FROM OUTLAWS TO LEGENDARY HEROES

IKRAM AHMED ELSHERIF

The release of the American film, *Joker* (2019), according to A. O. Scott's review in the *New York Times*, has "stirred up quite a tempest" and "a fierce debate" as critics and viewers alike oscillated between acclaiming and condemning it. Though Scott calls the film a "supervillain origin story"[1] that seems to encourage violence and anarchy, other reviews held a more "liberal worldview" and saw Arthur Fleck, the main character, as a "loner-hero" suffering from "lack of social safety" and, like "common folk who are sick of perceived elites," he uses violence to "empower" himself.[2] The film seems to reignite a debate that has been ongoing for decades: what is a hero? What goes into the making of a hero? And who decides? It urges us to revisit other "heroes"—the Robin Hoods of different times and different cultures—who have also lashed out at "perceived elites", and to reexamine the human conditions that shaped and conferred on them their hero status.

The film traces the life of Arthur Fleck (the titular Joker), familiar to comic book fans as one of the arch enemies of Batman. Arthur, who is an unsuccessful comedian (clown), suffers from a mental disorder which causes him to laugh uncontrollably when he is upset or stressed, and because of which he had been institutionalized for a period of time. When the film starts, he is seen in a meeting with the social worker who supervises his case, and it is clear not only that he feels isolated from the world, but also that she, as a representative of institutionalized ideology and official government, is performing routine work in which Arthur figures only as a

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[1] A. O. Scott "'Joker' Review: Are You Kidding Me!" *New York Times*, October 3, 2019, updated December 9, 2019.

[2] Christina Newland. "Joker Review: Joaquim Phoenix Antihero Is No Laughing Matter," *Sight & Sound Magazine*, January 13, 2020.

statistical “case”. The events roll on to reveal that he is constantly bullied and that he is an adopted son who was brutally abused as a child. A turning point in the events shows him in a subway train late at night, going home after work with his clown face still painted on. On the train, he witnesses the abusive behavior of three Wall Street young men harassing a young woman. Stressed and anxious, he starts to laugh and the young men, believing him to be laughing at them, attack and take turns beating him. In response, he shoots all three of them and runs away without being recognized. This murder triggers two parallel series of events. Arthur, having now stood up to defend himself against bullying and abuse, goes on a killing spree and murders three more people, including his mother, who have abused him in one form or another. However, what is equally disturbing is that his murder of the three young men triggers a kind of revolution. All the downtrodden citizens of Gotham City, suffering from neglect and living in poverty and filth, rise up against the more privileged classes who live in luxury, oblivious to their suffering. Arthur becomes their hero, and his clown mask becomes a symbol of resistance.[3]

Arthur is a mentally disturbed individual who is turned, because of overwhelming circumstances and a life of abuse and social isolation, into a criminal and an outlaw, but the end of the film shows the common people of Gotham hailing him as their hero. But, is he a hero? Heroes, explains Donna Rosenberg in *World Mythology: An Anthology of Great Myths and Epics*, “are the models of human behavior for their society. They earn lasting fame—the only kind of immortality possible for a human being—by performing great deeds that help their community, and they inspire others to emulate them.”[4] Arthur is certainly not a model of human behavior, and his deeds (murders) are anything but great. Rather than a hero in the traditional sense, Arthur figures more, if considerably loosely, as a kind of a modern Robin Hood, an outlaw hero of the common oppressed folk.

The story of Arthur is both disturbing and intriguing because it seems to draw on a long standing “outlaw hero tradition” in folklore and literature which Graham Seal terms the “Robin Hood Principle.” Seal contends that “the outlaw hero tradition is so broadly diffused in time and space that, without positing any universalized essentialism, it can be understood as an international and perennial product of human experience. The need to generate and perpetuate the noble robber, the good thief, or the social bandit

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[3] *Joker*, directed by Todd Philipps (Village Roadshow Pictures and DC Films, 2019).
[4] Donna Rosenberg. *World Mythology: An Anthology of Great Myths and Epics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), xvii.

is found in cultures around the world."[5] The outlaw hero is a hero of the people, a social bandit who springs from the masses, suffers injustice and challenges the powers that be and their figures of authority.

The need for a hero to champion the weak and the downtrodden is, thus, a universal phenomenon. This need intensifies, according to Seal, "in historical circumstances in which one or more social, cultural, ethnic, or religious groups believe themselves to be oppressed and unjustly treated by one or more other groups who wield greater power."[6] Yet, in times of duress a real hero who embodies the traditional moral values of society may not materialize. In these times, people, or the common folk, argues the Egyptian historian Gamal Badawi in *Egypt Through the Window of History*, "look for a hero to fill the land with justice after it has been filled with injustice, and if they cannot find him in reality … they create him in imagination" (my translation).[7] The propensity of common folk to imagine a hero into being is an intriguing aspect of the universal phenomenon of the search for a hero, especially when this imagined hero is no more and no less than an outlaw.

Arthur Fleck in the *Joker*, represented as a victim, turned criminal, turned controversial hero, challenges traditional notions of heroism and stirs in the audience a disturbing sense of ambivalence. He thus invokes, and urges us to revisit, two other folk outlaw heroes whose history, actual existence and perpetuation in folk traditions in their respective cultures are subject to much controversy: the English forest thief Robin Hood, who has become a universal "prototypic outlaw hero,"[8] and the Egyptian criminal Yasin. Both these figures, like other outlaw heroes around the world, "are celebrated in folklore, romanticized in the mass media, and commodified in the tourism and heritage industries."[9] The romanticized representation of these two outlaw figures in their respective folk traditions and in literature begs for investigation to tease out the underlying common human values and conditions which inspired folk imagination to turn them into immortalized legends. Robin Hood and Yasin are examples of "peasant bandits" or "social bandits" who are, according to anthropologist Eric Hobsbawn, "unwilling to bear the traditional burdens of the common man

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[5] Graham Seal, "The Robin Hood Principle: Folklore, History, and the Social Bandit," *Journal of Folklore Research* 46, no.1 (Jan. – Apr., 2009): 69.
[6] Ibid., 70.
[7] جمال بدوي، مصر من *نافذة التارخ*، القاهرة: دار الشروق، 1994
Gamal Badawi, *Egypt Through the Window of History* (Cairo: Dar Alshorouq, 1994), 192.
[8] Tim, Lundgren, "The Robin Hood Ballads and the English Outlaw tradition," *Southern Folklore* 53, no. 3 (1996): 225.
[9] Seal, 69.

in a class society, poverty and meekness," and therefore "receive the tribute of ballads and anecdotes."[10] Their stories resonate with the universal "Hero-Ogre" folk tales examined by Ian Joblings, and, like most folkloric stories, reflect a cross-cultural universal phenomenon informed by basic human social and psychological needs.

In his "Introduction to the Robin Hood Ballads" in *Popular Ballads of the Olden Times*: *Ballads of Robin Hood and Other Outlaws,* Frank Sidgwick boldly contended in the early 20th century that "Robin Hood the yeoman outlaw never existed in the flesh. As the goddess Athena sprang from the head of Zeus, Robin Hood sprang from the imagination of the English people."[11] In a lecture delivered at Gresham College on May 1st, 2018, Stephen Church, professor of Medieval history, supports this bold statement. He contends that "there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever that there was a physical person called Robin Hood who was the progenitor of our mythical Robin Hood. Neither the most diligent archivist nor the most inventive historian has been able to find him."[12] Numerous studies have been conducted at different periods of time attempting to explore and investigate the "myth" of Robin Hood to determine its origins and the reason the character of Robin Hood and his tales have come to occupy a prominent place in folk imagination and in "national [British] history even though their historicity is, to say the least, doubtful."[13] Most studies contend that ballads of Robin Hood and his exploits originated during the reign of the Norman King Henry II and his son King Richard the Lionheart. The early ballads and even later retellings of the stories and tales, as Sidgwick maintains, portray Robin Hood as the "ideal champion of the popular cause under feudal conditions."[14] Robin, an Anglo-Saxon yeoman (or peasant) driven to outlawry by the oppressive Norman feudal system exhibits how "breaking the 'King's peace' might have been considered a good by common members

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[10] Eric Hobsbawn, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: Praeger, 1963), 15.
[11] Frank Sidgwick, introduction to *Popular Ballads of Olden Time*. Fourth Series, *Ballads of Robin Hood and Other Outlaws* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, LTD, n.d.). Release on project Gutenburg, May 10, 2009.
[12] Stephen Church, "In Search of the Medieval Outlaw: The tales of Robin Hood," (lecture presented at Gresham College, May 1st, 2018), http://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/in-search-of-the-medieval-oulaw-the-tales-of-robin-hood.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Sidgwick, Introduction to *Popular Ballads of Olden Time*.

of society" who are exploited and oppressed by the upper classes.[15] Robin Hood fights foreign Norman rule and corruption and "his enemies are those in office who exercise sovereign power corruptly."[16]

Though an outlaw, popular imagination endowed Robin Hood with heroic traits and qualities which endeared him to the public. In the "First Fytte" of the *Gest of Robyn Hode*, a compilation of the old Robin Hood ballads, printed in the 16th century and reprinted in *Ballads of Robin Hood and Other Outlaws*, Robin is described as follows:

Robyn was a prude [proud] outlaw,
  Whyles he walked on grounde;
So curteyse [courteous] an outlaw as he was one
  Was never non yfounde.
    …
A gode maner [habit] than had Robyn:
  In londe [land] where that he were,
Every day or [before] he wold dyne [dine]
  Thre [three] messis [masses] wolde he here [hear].

The one in the worship of the Fader [Father],
  And another of the Holy Gost,
The Thirde was of Our dere [dear] Lady
  That he loved allther [altogether] moste.

Robyn loved Oure dere Lady;
  For dout [fear] of dydly synne [deadly sin],
Wolde he never do company harme
  That any woman was in.[17]

Robin then was a good yeoman, a proud and most courteous outlaw (courteous in the sense that he robbed the rich and corrupt to give to the poor). As Howard Pyle represents him in *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* (1883), he and his band "were outlaws and dwelled apart from other men, yet they were beloved by the country people round about, for no one ever came to jolly Robin in time of need and went away again with an empty

[15] Nicholas A. Curott and Alexander Fink, "Bandit Heroes: Social, Mythical, or Rational?" *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 72, no. 2 (April, 2012): 484.
[16] Church.
[17] Sidgwick, "First Fytte".

fist."[18] Robin also had a good habit of never dining wherever he was until he had heard three masses, one for the Father, one for the Holy Ghost and one for the Virgin Mary. He loved the Virgin so much that he would never harm a company if a woman was in it. Robin's championing of the poor then is complemented by his courtesy, his religious zeal and his respect and devotion for all women for the sake of the Virgin Mary.

Thus, though an outlaw, Robin Hood has become a national hero, and retellings of his tales, not only in Britain, but also around the globe, according to Geoffrey Gates, draws attention to the "metanarrative" underlying these tales: "the struggle for truth and justice, for freedom against tyranny, where oppression is largely externalized in the Norman Other."[19] The universal metanarrative embedded in the Robin Hood stories and the far reach of these stories through many retellings and cinematic adaptations up to the present day justify Eric Hobsbawn in dubbing him "the archetype of the social rebel"[20] in his pioneering study *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Robin Hood is also the embodiment of what Hobsbawn later terms the "social bandits," those "peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders for liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported."[21] And even though a gentrified Robin Hood, the Earl of Huntington, Robert Locksley, appeared later in literature, he was, as Church explains, "a post-medieval character" created to satisfy the taste not of the peasantry, but of a more genteel and aristocratic audience.[22] Robin, the yeoman of the early and more influential ballads, remains essentially a peasant rising from the ranks of the common folk to defend them against exploitation and social and political oppression.

While Robin Hood is a mythical character born of the imagination of an oppressed and dispossessed people, the Egyptian Yasin is a real historical character. Yet his real story is, according to Badawi, "completely devoid of

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[18] Howard Pyle, *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* (Scribner's, 1883; The Floating Press, 2009), 9.

[19] Geoffrey Gates, "'Always the Outlaw': The Potential for Subversion of the Metanarrative in Retellings of Robin Hood," *Children's Literature in Education* 37, no.1 (March 2006): 69.

[20] Hobsbawn, *Primitive Rebels*, 4.

[21] Eric Hobsbawn, *Bandits*, Revised edition (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969/1981), 17.

[22] Church.

all elements of heroism and honor" (my translation).[23] The real Yasin was a member of the Al-'Ababdah tribe in Upper Egypt at the beginning of the 20th century. Historical records reveal that Yasin was a hardened criminal whose chosen profession was murder and robbery. Killing for him was entertainment and he was exhilarated when he heard that the mere mention of his name inspired fear and terror in people. For years he terrorized the whole Upper Egyptian region, and people, including his family and tribe, were too terrified to report him. He committed his crimes and then he and his gang fled to the mountains out of the reach of the law. However, eventually he was trapped and killed in 1905 by a young army officer of the Camel Corps. When Yasin was killed, a woman, Bahiyya, rushed out of the cave he had taken as a hideout with an infant in her arms. She was screaming with joy that she was finally rid of him. It turned out later that Yasin had kidnapped her and forced her to be his mistress.[24] When Yasin's body was taken to the city and the news of his death went out, an Upper Egyptian bard (*Sha'ir*) sang the story which became a folk ballad sung all over Egypt:

> "Oh, Bahiyya do tell me who killed Yasin!"
> "*Alsudaniyya* [the Sudanese] killed him from on top the backs of camels."
> (my translation)

The Sudanese here is a reference to the fact that the majority of the soldiers in the camel corps were Sudanese, and the Egyptian officer who led the attack and killed Yasin had dark skin.

Except for the two first lines of the ballad, which are well known to most people in Egypt, the rest of the original ballad was lost or was changed out of recognition. However, many ballads and songs, which used these two surviving lines as a refrain, were born out of it and turned the story of Yasin into a legend and a folk story of love, between Yasin and Bahiyya, and of feats of heroism accomplished by Yasin against oppression and tyranny to bring justice to the downtrodden Egyptian peasants. The legend of Yasin has also provided readily available fertile material for the imagination of literary writers who used it, added to it and developed and utilized it to reflect on their contemporary political and social conditions.

Probably the most full-fledged literary work which utilized the legend is Najib Surur's 1964 novel in verse, *Yasin wa Bahiyya (Yasin and Bahiyya)* which was repeatedly adapted to the stage and to the silver screen and

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[23] Badawi, 190.

[24] Badawi, 192; محمود دياب، *ابطال الكفاح الاسلامي المعاصر*. القاهرة: مطبوعات الشعب، 1978. Mahmoud Diab, *Heroes of Contemporary Islamic Struggle* (Cairo: Matboat AlSha'ab, 1978), 134-138.

cinema, a fact which, according to Sasson Somekh, "achieved [for it] a measure of canonization"[25] that also extended to its main characters, Yasin and Bahiyya. In the novel Surur moves the events from Upper Egypt to a small village, Bahut, in the Delta, makes Yasin and Bahiyya cousins, and recreates Yasin and endows him with the charisma and nobility of a hero. Yasin is

> Strong … he was a strong man
> …
> Nourished from the veins of the land
> The land of Bahut ..
> He was brown like wheat bread,
> Tall like a palm tree,
> Broad-shouldered ..
> Like a camel,
> His forehead was that of an untamed horse
> His moustaches were a lion's ..
> Strong enough for a falcon to perch on!
> A forest covered his chest
> Like acacia trees guarding a field. (All translations of the Arabic text are my translations)[26]

Bahut and what happens in Bahut in the story is supposed to stand a microcosm of the whole of Egypt and what happened in Egypt in the period before the 1952 revolution. Surur presents Yasin as a son of Egypt, a product of its land, brown, strong and proud. Like a true son of the land of Bahut (Egypt), he "loved the Nile with a love that bordered on worship." And like a true son, he appreciates the simple life and beauty of the land. He does not dream of "palaces" or "rivers of wine and honey", but only of a simple life with his beloved cousin Bahiyya.[27] Yet the dream, simple as it is, is unattainable. Yasin is poor and landless, a mere hired hand brought up by his equally poor uncle after the death of his father in prison and after their half acre of land was usurped by the all-powerful Pasha, the feudal Turkish landowner. He and his uncle have to "Work ../ work ../ like bulls working waterwheels/ lifting mountains of water … yet get nothing but thirst."[28]

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[25] Sasson Somekh, *Genre and Language in Modern Arabic Literature* (Harrassowitz: Weisbaden, 1991), 68.
[26] نجيب سرور، *ياسين وبهية*. القاهرة: دار الشروق، 2008.
Najib Surur, *Yasin and Bahiyya* (Cairo: Dar Alshorouq, 2008), 19.
[27] Ibid., 20.
[28] Ibid., 70.

Like most people in Bahut, except the Pasha's men, the government accountant, the Pasha's sentries and the Pasha's clerk, Yasin and his uncle are beholden to the Pasha. They "plant … plant/ then harvest nothing ..!/ while the other harvests ../ then harvests ../ but plants nothing."[29] Dispossessed and oppressed, hungry and overworked, Yasin is sustained by his love for Bahiyya and his dream and hope of marrying her when he and his uncle are able to save enough money. Yet even that dream is threatened, not only by the Pasha's economic exploitation of the poor peasants, but also by his dishonorable intentions toward the beautiful Bahiyya. One day, about a year before the opening of the narrative, a messenger arrived from the Palace of the Pasha summoning Bahiyya to serve in the palace and promising luxury and plenty. But everybody in Bahut knew what type of "services" Bahiyya would have to perform:

> A girl goes to the palace light ..
> Sweet ..
> Like a butterfly ..
> After a year the 'girl' comes back heavy ..
> Bloated ..
> Humiliated ..
> Like a dog ..
> …
> And so she must ..
> Die ..
> Be buried!
> That is the way shame is hidden in Bahut ..[30]

Knowing this, Yasin refused to let Bahiyya go and he paid dearly for it. He was taken one night and "they [the Pasha's men] hanged him by the feet and kept beating him .. with bare palm branches .., until the cock crowed!"[31] Now the ominous messenger returns again and fear for Bahiyya recalls all grievances and unlocks floods of bitterness and rage in Yasin who

> Throws at the palace a look ..
> Like a bullet ..
> From the window ..
> Oh father … oh, you lonely half acre ..
> Oh floods of sweat ..
> Oh lost harvests ..

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[29] Ibid., 74-75.
[30] Ibid., 118-119.
[31] Ibid., 31.

Every year ..
You damned Ghoul!
You will not take what is left from me ..
Before you take my soul ..
‘What is left to me in the world ..
What is left except her, Bahiyya!’
Impossible!!
Impossible!![32]

Afraid for Bahiyya, for his dream, and afraid of “growing horns ../ on the heads,”[33] Yasin finally releases his bent up rage and leads a rebellion against the Pasha and his men and he and the people of Bahut burn down the palace and granary of the Pasha who manages to escape to the capital. Yasin’s heroic victory over oppression and exploitation, however, is short-lived because it “is too serious a threat for the authorities to accept with complacency.”[34] Thus “the Camel Corps descends on the village one afternoon ../ thousands of camels … and bullets ../ Like rain,”[35] and Yasin is shot in the head.

The only similarity between the real historical story of Yasin and Surur’s fictional story is the lines:

“Oh, Bahiyya do tell me who killed Yasin!”
She answers ..
Crying ..
“(…) killed him from on top the backs of camels!”[36]

In the original ballad, the killer is directly and openly identified as “*Alsudaniyya*” or the Sudanese who, at the time of the historical event, formed the majority of the soldiers in the Camel Corps. However, though the events in Surur’s story clearly show that Yasin was killed by the camel corps, representing the authority that backs and protects the corruption of the Pasha, Surur leaves the killer in these two lines unidentified, perhaps to allow his readers to fill in the gap depending on the times and the political and social conditions in their own lived experiences. As Sayed Ali Ismail explains, Surur uses the ballad and the character of Yasin “to project” his

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[32] Ibid., 128-129.
[33] Ibid., 137.
[34] Ali Al Ra’i, “Arabic Drama since the Thirties,” in *Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. M. M. Badawi (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 364.
[35] Surur, 159.
[36] Ibid., 166.