
The path he trod

The work of the late Egyptian historian Raouf Abbas was the subject of a seminar held at the National Center for Translation this week, **Taher El-Barbary** reports

Raouf Abbas, professor of modern Egyptian history and former deputy dean of Cairo University's Faculty of Arts, shall always be remembered as a scholar for his pioneering research on land ownership in Egypt and the Country's labour movement, and for the seminal influence he had on generations of Egyptian historians researching Egypt's socio-political development in modern times. Since his premature death at the age of 69 last summer, following a brief but brave struggle with cancer, many institutions, including the Egyptian Society for Historiography and Cairo University, paid tribute to the work and life of Abbas, as an accomplished scholar and a public intellectual.



Raouf Abbas

This week, the National Centre for Translation (NCT), chaired by Cairo University's Arabic literature professor Gaber Asfour, organized another commemorative meeting dedicated this time to the role of Abbas as translator. Though Asfour attended the meeting, he only spoke from the auditorium, explaining the difficulty of talking about a close friend and colleague whose long intellectual journey began and coincided with that of Asfour. "Given my deep sorrow and grief for the death of Raouf Abbas, I find it difficult to talk about this close friend and the many memories we shared together without being emotional," Asfour said.

The NCT meeting was chaired by Emad Abu-Ghazy of the Supreme Council for Culture, a historian and one of Abbas's students. The three participants in the discussion panel were Nelly Hanna, professor of history at the American University in Cairo, veteran translator Shawky Galal and Nasser Ibrahim, history lecturer at Cairo University and another Abbas disciple.

In his brief introduction to the career of Raouf Abbas as a translator, Galal said that Abbas's work in the field of translation had paved the way for more rigorous translations into Arabic. Abbas was an exceptional scholar, Galal explained, who spent an arduous effort in providing scholarly prefaces and footnotes to the books he translated and revised. "All his translations reflect a deep understanding of the subject-matter and a scholarly concern for the methodology behind the translated work," Galal said. He cited Abbas's translation of Nelly Hanna's *A Cultural History of Cairo's Middle Class, Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* as an exemplary model for translators. "The significance of this translation lies in the translator's remarkable ability to digest, explain and illuminate the history of Egyptian culture during the Ottoman period."

Nelly Hanna, a close associate of Abbas who collaborated with him in many works including *Society and Economy in Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean, 1600- 1900*, a book they jointly co-edited, spoke about his translations of her work as an example of a unique joint venture between author and translator, expressing her personal gratitude and intellectual indebtedness to Raouf Abbas.

In his intervention, Nasser Ibrahim spoke in detail about Abbas's career, both as a scholar and translator, explaining how the two aspects of his work -- research and translation -- were motivated by the same intellectual concern. "Translation was one of Abbas's tools to accomplish his objective of making source material and foreign documents available to Arab researchers," Ibrahim said, citing the translation of Roger Owen's 2004 book *Lord Cromer: Victorian Imperialist, Edwardian Proconsul* as an example of books translated by Abbas to enrich the Arabic library with seminal works on the history of modern Egypt.

Beside documents and source material, Ibrahim added, Abbas was also keen on translating theoretical works necessary for the understanding of world social transformations, to enrich the methodology adopted by his students in their research. One example of the books translated in this field by Abbas, Ibrahim said, was Maurice Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*.

"In fact Raouf Abbas was very keen to enrich the discipline of historical studies and historiography with translations of pertinent theoretical and methodological contributions. Thus, he succeeded in engineering a qualitative leap in the research carried under his supervision, as well as providing the Arabic library with much needed reference work," Ibrahim said.

"The systematic and methodic work of Raouf Abbas in the field of translation is a testimony both to his dedication to an academic discipline and the cultural project of *al-Nahda* (revivalism). He selected works in line with his 40-year scholarly and cultural preoccupations," Ibrahim added. As a translator, Ibrahim said, Abbas contributed much to the field of history research, a difficult discipline in Egypt, as many authorities in the field oppose vehemently any inter-disciplinary innovations. Against such narrow-mindedness, Abbas translated many inter-disciplinary works, as well as translating controversial books, dealing in his introductions to such works with the methodological problems they pose.

Ibrahim concluded by drawing attention to an equally important body of Abbas's work which does not strictly fall under the category of translation: his work on British Public Record Office documents as well as several private-paper collections. "In his work examining and writing on foreign documents and reports, Abbas used to translate substantial parts of the relevant documents within his work. His paper entitled 'The July Revolution in the British Archive' is one example. Another is his book on the private papers of Henry Curiel."

While the NCT's seminar this week succeeded in shedding light on one aspect of the career of a formidable Egyptian scholar whose contribution to academic life will always be cherished, it is to be hoped that the wider aspect of Abbas's life as a public intellectual and reformer will be the topic of further study. Abbas himself had written a moving autobiography, *Meshaynaha Khotan* (The Path We Trod). Careful to avoid imparting personal or intimate information, Abbas's autobiography is almost unique in that it deals only with the public aspect of the writer's experience, yet manages to be thoroughly engaging and informative all the same. An apt tribute, perhaps, to the man as translator would be to translate *Meshaynaha Khotan* into English.

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