

## 'TRAVELLING CONCEPTS' IN TRANSLATION: FEMINISM AND GENDER IN THE EGYPTIAN CONTEXT

Hala KAMAL<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

*In light of the notions of 'Travelling Theory' (Edward Said 1982), and 'Travelling Concepts' (Mieke Bal 2002; Birgit Neumann & Ansgar Nunning 2012), this article discusses 'feminism' as a travelling theory and 'gender' as a travelling concept in the Egyptian context, through their equivalents and translations in Arabic language. The article traces the histories of the two terms in Egypt, and problematises feminism and gender as complex transnational ideologies and categories, travelling across histories, geographies, cultures, disciplines, languages and politics. This study uses an interdisciplinary approach, and thus stands at the intersection of feminist theory, cultural studies and translation studies.*

**Keywords:** travelling, culture, translation, feminism, gender, Egypt.

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### *1. Introduction*

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Edward Said opens his groundbreaking article "Traveling Theory" (1982) with the following statement: "Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another", Edward Said highlights the effects of the "transplantation, transference, circulation, and commerce of theories and ideas". (Said, 2000: 195-196) In her study "Knowledge in Motion" (2008), Marwa Elshakry focuses on the translocation of scientific knowledge through translation into Arabic at the turn of the twentieth century, and states that "the practice of translation involves often very substantial epistemological, authorial, and literary shifts across cultures and over time". (Elshakry, 2008: 704) Shifting from theories to a focus on concepts and metaphors, Mieke Bal states in her book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (2002) that in interdisciplinary cultural analysis, methods are usually fixed, while concepts "are the sites of debate, awareness of difference, and tentative exchange". (Bal, 2002: 13) In a more recent discussion of the cultural transfer and transformation of theories and concepts, in the opening chapter of their edited book, *Travelling Concepts for the Study of Culture* (2012), Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nunning point out that cultural studies have been witnessing "the ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> Hala Kamal, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt, hala.kamal@cu.edu.eg

trend towards interdisciplinarity and internationalisation” in a world increasingly characterised by “border-crossing” (Neumann and Nunning, 2012: 1). One of the models of studying culture in motion is that of translation, proposed by Doris Bachmann-Medick, who suggests that cultural encounters, mediated through translation, have led to the emergence of a ‘translation turn’ in cultural studies, whereby “translation has not only become a precondition of ‘travelling concepts’ in the humanities and the social sciences, but is a ‘travelling concept’ itself” (Bachmann-Madick, 2012: 24). Gender is another ‘travelling concept’ specifically relevant in the context of interdisciplinarity and translation in the humanities and the social sciences. Greta Olson explores ‘gender’ as a ‘travelling concept’ across disciplines and cultures (Olson, 2012: 205ff) and argues that in its transnational journey, the concept ‘gender’ has undermined the politics of feminism.

In light of the notions of ‘travelling theory’, ‘knowledge in motion’ and ‘travelling concepts’, this article aims at offering an understanding of feminism as a travelling theory, and gender as a travelling concept with particular focus on the uses of the terms feminism and gender in Egypt. This study will therefore attempt to answer the following questions: What is meant by travelling theories and concepts? What are the theoretical paradigms used in the study of travelling theories and concepts? To what extent is feminism a travelling theory? What is the history of gender as a travelling concept? How do the politics of translation and problematics of translatability reflect the process of gender’s journey into and within the Arabic language and Egyptian context? How does the translation of the concept gender reflect its position as a travelling concept – across cultures, contexts and disciplines? At the end, the article will explain the author’s personal choice of a particular translation of the term ‘gender’ into Arabic, in light of feminist translation praxis. The study is therefore divided, in addition to the introduction and conclusion, into three main parts devoted to an examination of the notions of travelling knowledge (theories and concepts), and the processes of knowledge transportation and transformation through translation, in relation to the theory of ‘feminism’ and the concept of ‘gender’, within the Egyptian context.

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## ***2. Travelling theories and concepts***

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This section looks into the use of the metaphor of travelling in the study of theories and concepts as they move across countries, cultures and languages. The first sub-section discusses the transformations that theories and concepts undergo in both literature as shown by Edward Said, as well as in the sciences as manifested by Marwa Elshakry. In the second sub-section, there is more focus on concepts as they cross disciplinary borders and thus create new spaces of interdisciplinarity and intersectionality through transportation and translation.

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### 2.1 Travelling theories in literature and science

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In his article entitled “Traveling Theory”, originally published in 1982 and repeatedly republished along the years, Edward Said highlights the circulation of theories across national and cultural borders using the metaphor of ‘traveling’ – a metaphor that has been variably adopted and expanded since its inception. Said was not only interested in the transportation of ideas, but was particularly concerned with their transformation in the process, and their influence upon this cross-cultural translocation. Said, thus, describes the movement of theories and ideas across cultural environments in the following terms:

*There are particular interesting cases of ideas and theories that move from one culture to another, as when so-called Eastern ideas about transcendence were imported into Europe during the early nineteenth century, or when certain European ideas about society were translated into traditional Eastern societies during the later nineteenth century. Such movement into a new environment is never unimpeded. It necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin. This complicates any account of the transplantation, transference, circulation, and commerce of theories and ideas (Said, 2000: 196).*

He then follows this statement by offering a four-stage paradigm of the motion of theories and ideas, which can be summarised in the following four points: 1) the “point of origin” which refers to the cultural environment in which the theory or idea emerged and developed; 2) the “passage” which involves the process of movement itself across temporality and spatiality; 3) the “conditions” which surround the process of translocation, which take the forms of introduction, acceptance, toleration and/or resistance; 4) the transformation of the travelling theory in terms of its accommodation, incorporation and occupation of “its new position in a new time and place” (196). Edward Said thus argues that ideas and theories travel across time and place, and are in the process subject to development and change; and is concretely concerned with the movement of literary and cultural theory across history and geography.

Echoing Said’s thoughts and terms, Marwa Elshakry examines the ‘circulation’ of scientific texts in the Arab world in the nineteenth century, paying particular attention to the cultural politics in the transformation of scientific knowledge in the process of translation into Arabic language:

*Through translation, texts are literally relocated: “translatio” implies “carrying across” linguistic and conceptual schemes or boundaries. Mediated by historical contingency and geopolitical and social changes – as well as aesthetic preferences and arbitrary or individual judgments – translation can be seen as discursive*

*engagements, as forms of syncretic knowledge, overlapping authorships, and intertwined sources of sociocultural authority” (Elshakry, 2008: 704).*

Elshakry also refers to the various paratextual elements and translation strategies such as prefaces, footnotes, commentaries, omissions and substitutions, which generate a text significantly distant from its original. Another additional point is the translator’s choice when dealing with scientific terms – whereby the translator may opt for transliteration, derivation or coinage. In this context, Elshakry gives the example of the Arab nineteenth century translator, Shibli Shumayyil, whose translation of Darwin’s theories into Arabic was marked by his awareness of the obstacles of finding equivalents in Arabic language that accurately deliver Darwin’s ideas. Yet, it is worth noting that translation history and practice suggest that the issues related to the translation of theoretical and scientific terms do not end with the choice of one option over the other. In fact, the introduction of a new term or concept in translation, more often than not, opens the door for further discussion and negotiation that may eventually lead to its fixation, or to the development of other alternatives.

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## *2.2 Travelling concepts in the humanities and culture*

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At the outset of her book on interdisciplinary studies in the humanities, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (2002), Mieke Bal argues that interdisciplinarity and cultural analysis should be founded on concepts rather than methods (Bal, 2002: 5). She further explains that such an approach leads to the identification and development of transdisciplinary concepts, such as for example the concepts of ‘narrative’ and ‘subjectivity’, which exist in the humanities (literature, history, philosophy, etc.) as well as the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc.). Bal, too, uses the metaphor of the journey in her discussion of the transdisciplinarity of concepts:

*But concepts are not fixed. They travel – between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities. Between disciplines, their meaning, reach, and operational value differ. These processes of differing need to be assessed before, during, and after each ‘trip’ (Bal, 2002: 24).*

Here, again, echoing Said, Bal recognises the importance of tracing the whole ‘trip’ from its departure up till its arrival and beyond. She gives the concrete example of the concept of ‘hybridity’ in its transdisciplinary journey from biology to criticism and to postcolonial studies, as well as a concept travelling in history and geography from nineteenth century Europe to twentieth century Eastern Europe, then postcolonial East and Western academia (Bal, 2002: 24-25). Bal further suggests that when travelling between disciplines, concepts often take the form of a cluster of affiliated concepts, such as ‘the look’, ‘the gaze’, ‘focalization’, ‘image’,

'visuality' and 'iconicity' in their journey within and across the disciplines of narrative theory, visual studies, and extending into feminism and cultural studies (35-39).

In the opening chapter of their edited book, *Travelling Concepts for the Study of Culture* (2012), Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nunning insightfully point out that "the concept of 'travelling concepts' is itself a travelling concept par excellence" (Neumann and Nunning, 2012: 4). Having originated in Edward Said's groundbreaking article "Traveling Theory" in 1982, the concept and metaphor have been travelling through academic and cultural circles across the world throughout the past decades. However, the authors' attention in this chapter extends beyond the journey itself and its concomitant transformations, paying significant attention to the role of the agents and mediators involved in the process, stating that "travelling activities are frequently performed by agents, who negotiate between different academic cultures and disciplines" (Neumann and Nunning, 2012: 9). This mediation process is further elaborated as follows:

*To the extent that mediators always act according to existing interests and always operate within certain power relations, such as the hierarchies between disciplines or between regional cultures of knowledge, they are likely to transform concepts according to very particular intellectual, epistemological, political and historical requirements. The social situatedness of agent is therefore just as important as the more general academic contexts in which concepts are developed and disseminated* (Neumann and Nunning, 2012: 9).

In their discussion of mediation, the authors point out the impact of the media in transporting and representing concepts and producing knowledge, in addition to the role of translator as agents in the journey of concepts across languages and cultures. They further offer a paradigm of "transnational and interdisciplinary approaches to the study of culture", based on travelling across four major boundaries: "academic disciplines", geographic and "national boundaries", "historical periods", as well as "academia and society" (11). The first three dimensions invite a cultural analysis of the journey itself with focus on the process of *transportation*. On the other hand, the approach, which involves the examination of the process of travelling across the boundaries of academic discourse and social practice, is more closely concerned with the process of *mediation*, and the various expressions of concepts in academia and their representations in culture.

Translation is a significant means of cultural interaction and mediation. Moreover, the 'cultural turn' in translation studies, together with the 'translational turn' in cultural studies,<sup>2</sup> have broadened the scope of translation, viewing it, in Doris Bachmann-Medick's terms, potentially as "a transnational cultural practice" and "a

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the different 'turns' in Translation Studies, see for example: Mary Snell-Hornby, *Turns of Translation Studies*.

model for conducting cultural research” (Bachmann-Medick, 2012: 23). Furthermore, as a cultural concept and analytical category, translation adds a transnational dimension to cultural studies:

*One thing, though, is already clear: the (transnational) study of culture can profit a lot from a concrete and critical sensitivity to cultural translation processes in their political dimensions and underlying structures: their implicit strategies, their claims to power and hegemony, their manipulations and acts of violence, as well as the opportunities for intervention that they offer* (Bachmann-Medick, 2012: 39).

Bachmann-Medick argues that the translational turn can be only fully achieved when translation becomes a transdisciplinary transnational analytical category, and hence calls for “the search of methods and research concepts that do not remain restricted to Western knowledge traditions”, with translation developing into a model for transnational cultural studies (38). Translation, as pointed out by Bachmann-Medick, and in light of Edward Said’s ‘travelling theory’ as well as Mieke Bal’s together with Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nunning’s ‘travelling concepts’, has developed from a cultural practice and research model to become a ‘travelling concept’.

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### ***3. The journeys of feminism***

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Building on the notion of travelling theories and concepts, this section is devoted to a discussion of feminism as a travelling theory, with particular reference to the Arab, and particularly Egyptian context. Feminism is first established as a theory, explored in its transportation and transformation, and is then analysed as a theory which has emerged in the Arab world almost simultaneously with the West. The main argument in this section is that feminism as theory has originated in different parts of the world and has travelled in various directions – including its journeys across history and geography in the Egyptian context.

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#### ***3.1 Feminism as a travelling theory***

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Feminism has initially emerged as an ideology and social movement in different parts of the world at the turn of the twentieth century. The feminist theoretician and critic, Maggie Humm, describes feminism, in her *Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, in terms of “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” (Humm, 1990: 74). A decade later, similarly, though more elaborately, Marilyn Frye defines feminism in the *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories* as follows:

*Feminism may be understood as theory – systems of concepts, prepositions and analysis that describe and explain women’s situations and experiences and support recommendations about how to improve them. ... Feminism may also be understood as a kind of social movement, one that may generate and be aided by theory. Both are concerned with women’s flourishing – women controlling adequate resources, of all sorts, to live well (Frye, 2000: 195).*

Feminism, thus, is a theory that has its socio-cultural manifestations. It is, moreover, a ‘travelling theory’ and a global phenomenon with its various ideological and social representations. Most societies across the world have witnessed multiple forms of feminism, and waves of feminist movements that have received serious historical documentation in the past few decades. Feminism has furthermore developed into various feminisms – marking the intersections of feminism with other disciplines, theories, and ideologies. Hence: social feminism, black feminism, liberal feminism, radical feminism, post-colonial feminism, Islamic feminism, Arab feminism, among many other feminisms – all of which are founded on the ideology of feminism, and manifest themselves in various degrees of theoretical grounding or socio-political activism. And even within each of these feminisms, further sub-feminisms can be identified; so in the case of Arab feminism for example, there are the various historical periods/waves of feminism that distinguish Egyptian feminism from Tunisian feminism, from Syrian feminism, from Palestinian feminism, and again within and across the Arabian Gulf countries.

As a socio-political phenomenon, feminism did not historically originate in one part of the world from which it spread onwards. We have traces of feminist thought and practices across history and geography. Feminism as a theory, ideology, and a social agenda for change has taken clear shape within Western academia and international organisations (specifically the UN) since the 1970s, and has then travelled within and across different parts of the world – in the framework of what is known as the second wave of the Western feminist movement.

What I find particularly interesting in feminism as a travelling theory is the fact that it has not taken a one-way journey from the East to the West, as is the case with many earlier and later theories. Feminism has its 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. It is also interesting to note that feminism’s journeys have left their marks on it, expanding the initially conceived Feminist Theory to Feminist Theories, marked by the journeys of feminist theory across histories, geographies and cultures, as well as the interactions among these various feminisms.

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*3.2 Feminism in Arabic*

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The Western word 'feminism' has had its equivalent in Arabic since more or less the same time it started circulating in English. We cannot consider it, however, a typical 'travelling concept' in Edward Said's terms (outlined above), since it does not seem to have a point of origin from which it then spread. This can be possibly attributed to the fact that 'feminism' has always appeared in various forms in different cultures throughout the centuries, and it is only recently that it is being theorised. The word 'feminism' appears as early as nineteenth century publications in Arabic, and particularly in the women's press that proliferated at the turn of the twentieth century. However, it appears in what Mieke Bal describes as clusters of concepts (as mentioned above). Feminism is, thus, accompanied by other affiliated words: *al-niswiyy* (feminist in the masculine form), *al-niswiyya* (feminist in the feminine form), *al-nisā'iy* (women's), *al-nisā'* (women) and *al-mar'a* (woman).<sup>3</sup>

As an obvious example of the use of feminism as a word and ideology in Egypt – before the global development and circulation of feminist theory – I would like to refer to the concrete example of the Egyptian Women's Union which was established in 1923 by the first generation of Egyptian women feminist activists. The 'Egyptian Women's Union' is a literal translation of the Arabic *Al-ittihād al-nisā'iy al-misriyy* where the word used in the title is that of *al-nisā'iy* (women's). Whereas the programme of the Union is divided into three sections: the first part lists the general national demands adopted by Egyptian women/feminists; the second lists socio-economic demands, while the third part appears under the sub-heading *al-qism al-niswiyy*, which literally means 'women's part'. It is worth noting that, in Arabic, the word *al-mar'a* (woman) can have two plural forms: *al-nisā'* or *al-niswa* – the first being the more commonly used in Egypt, while the second is the less commonly used form.

I wish to further point out that that the first generation of Egyptian feminists chose the more common word to indicate 'women' while they implemented the less common word *niswiyy* and *niswiyya* in reference to the ideology and politics of women's liberation at the turn of the century. Egyptian feminists, nowadays, are very vocal about using the same terms in reference to feminism; and a clear distinction is made between 'womanhood', 'femininity', and 'feminism' in expressions of their everyday experiences. However, on a political level, Egyptian feminists have appropriated the term *al-niswiyya* as a contemporary equivalent to the (travelling) theory of 'feminism' in addition to its historical local use in reference to the social movement for women's rights.

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<sup>3</sup> I am using here the transliteration system used in Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, available online on: <https://ia802703.us.archive.org/16/items/HansWehr/HansWehr.pdf>.

The term ‘feminism’, as used in the Egyptian context, has travelled historically across various periods and waves of the Egyptian feminist movement.<sup>4</sup> More recently, it has also travelled across geographies, cultures, and disciplines, in the form of Feminist Theory. Yet, due to feminism’s roots in Egyptian history, the theory of feminism has been received by Egyptian academics and activists and assimilated within the Egyptian feminist discourse. Hence the continued use of the original Egyptian equivalent of ‘feminism’, namely ‘*al-niswiyya*’ – unlike the case with the travelling concept ‘gender’ which has been much more problematic in its adoption as reflected in its various translations into Arabic.

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#### *4. Gender as a travelling concept*

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Gender is examined here as a travelling, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary concept. Particular interest is given to the way in which gender as a term has been circulating through international organisations. The history of the emergence and development of the concept of gender in Egypt highlights the role of translation in the transportation and transformation of concepts across cultures. By tracing the various translations of the term ‘gender’ into Arabic in the Egyptian context, this study reveals how certain translation processes and strategies are connected to issues related to the politics of translatability.

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##### *4.1 Gender across disciplines and cultures*

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Unlike ‘feminism’ which emerged in different localities at various historical moments before ‘travelling’ as an established theory, ‘gender’ is a ‘travelling concept’ that originated in Western theory and practice, and offers a significant example of travelling theories and concepts across disciplines, cultures and languages. However, unlike the idealised cultural notion of travelling theories and concepts that views these process as promoting interdisciplinary and transnational values, some feminist reflections on the process of introducing ‘gender’ in various political and cultural environments, are vocally critical of the process.

In her insightful article, “Gender as a Travelling Concept”, Greta Olson’s main argument is that the concept of ‘gender’ has had an undermining effect on feminist politics (Olson, 2012: 206). Olson starts by showing the most common understanding of the term ‘gender’ as being a politically correct equivalent of ‘sex’ and implying sexual binarism (206), and as a marker of socio-cultural behavior in addition to a biological identity. However, historically speaking, Olson goes back to the origins of the word ‘gender’ and points out that it has originated as early as in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, in English grammar, as a term that indicated “the grammatical

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<sup>4</sup> For an outline of the history of the Egyptian feminist movement, see: Hala Kamal, “A Century of Egyptian Women’s Demands: The Four Waves of the Egyptian Feminist Movement”.

classification of various types of substantives” (208). It is a feature that she believes continues to define our understanding of gender as a contemporary critical, socio-cultural and behavioural concept that emerged out of sexology and sexuality studies.

Olson, however, examines the concept of gender from a feminist perspective – in light of the feminist thought that has started developing since the beginnings of the twentieth century, in the groundbreaking works of Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, and into the 1960s. The second half of the twentieth century marks the emergence of second-wave feminism, where feminist awareness takes the form of a theorised critique of femininity and social structures of power, together with more organised activism. Olson is critical of the shift to gender, which took place in the 1990s, also known in terms of the third-wave of the feminist movement, and considers it an actual threat and demise of feminism. Her feminist approach to gender leads her to a critique of the concept of gender, which has “displaced” the category of ‘woman’ and subsumed feminism under “the supposedly more inclusive theory of gender” (214).

*I want to argue that gender’s ascendancy as a critical concept, a theory of identity difference, and as an object of study has not been without negative consequences, particularly for feminism and for women’s studies. Gender’s post-1990s travels have in fact created points of dissonance and dissatisfaction in terms of the politics, the path of intellectual inquiry, and the institutional acceptance of feminism (Olson, 2016: 214).*

Thus, the emergence and circulation of the concept of gender resulted in the destabilization of the category of ‘woman’, undermining women’s experiences, and depoliticizing feminism. Olson is particularly critical of Judith Butler’s transnationalisation, as she views the rise of “Butlerian gender theory” as a manifestation of American hegemony, even at the level of the (un)translatability of the term itself. Moreover, the replacement of ‘women’ by ‘gender’ has led, politically, to more concern with ‘gender-mainstreaming’ policies instead of the more political agendas fighting discrimination against women. Olson also maintains that the “adoption of an English term into a variety of non-Anglophone areas of scholarship” coincides with the adoption of ‘Gender Theory’ and ‘Gender Studies’ as more comprehensive (inter)disciplines; and a feminist discussion of ‘gender’ suggests that, perhaps, after all, gender “has not travelled all that well” (220). I wish finally to point out that a feminist conceptualization of ‘gender’ as a ‘travelling concept’ indicates that it has not only undermined feminism, but has similarly failed to encompass other closely affiliated ideologies, identities, and politics such as LGBTIQ+, which have found it necessary to develop their own ideology and terminology under the emerging banner of Queer Theory.

Unlike Olson's interdisciplinary approach to 'gender', yet similar in her feminist perspective, Margara Millan, in her recent study on "The Travelling of 'Gender' and its Accompanying Baggage" (2016), adds another dimension to the development of gender discourses worldwide, and particularly since the 1990s. She derives her concrete examples of gender discourses from post-Soviet Eastern European countries within the framework of socio-political democratization, as well as examining UN and NGO development projects in Latin America (Millan, 2016, 6-7). Looking at the Mexican context, Millan asserts that Mexican feminism "has borrowed, followed, or adapted the main issues in gender and feminist theories while also theorizing for local realities and producing a localized politics" (10). She states:

*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 (Millan, 2016: 17).*

She argues here that international gender-dissemination and mainstreaming has been implemented through the imposition of "a series of gender policies" (13). Millan finds a good expression of this superimposed position of 'gender' in Eastern European countries as reflected in the problematics of translatability, as she points out the academics' tendency towards deriving or adopting established words in their languages, while activists tend to opt for the use of the word 'gender' in transliteration (16). Whereas in Hispanic Latin America, the local word '*género*' was appropriated as a term for the concept of 'gender', though the phrase 'gender perspective' is commonly used in official discussions of gender issues and has been adopted by some Catholic Church's charity projects to improve women's lives (17). Thus language reflects power relations, and the politics of translating gender shed light on the journeys of concepts in political, cultural, academic and activist contexts.

In light of Olson and Millan's critiques of the journeys of 'gender' as a concept, one of the main problematics related to gender is the fact that it has been appropriated by international organisations and development projects, and intentionally transported with its tool-kit (gender-mainstreaming policies). It is in this context that gender as a concept masquerades as a more inclusive term than feminism, and attempts to encompass it if not replace it. I believe, however, that gender travels better when it is situated, as a concept and analytical tool, within feminist theory rather than outside it; and within feminist activism rather than in development projects. Feminism, on the other hand, has not travelled one way, nor has it been superimposed by international agendas; and it additionally offers a

theoretical critical framework and a theory inclusive of various analytical categories such as gender, and different identity politics such as queer.

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#### *4.2 Gender and translation in Egypt*

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Edward Said's paradigm of 'travelling theory' (mentioned at the beginning of this article) suggests four stages of investigation, arguing that ideas undergo a process of transformation on their journey. I wish in the following to focus on gender as a travelling concept in the Egyptian context since the beginnings of its circulation in Arabic. My examination will trace the use of the term through its various translations into varieties of Arabic language – not only in its journey into the Egyptian context, but also within this local context itself. I wish to argue that the concept gender in translation has moved, to a great extent, according to Edward Said's paradigm: from its "point of origin" through the "passage", facing varying "conditions" of introduction, resistance and acceptance, until its current incorporation in development, feminist and academic discourses (Said, 2000: 196). My analysis here is also informed by Neumann and Nunning's paradigm of "transnational and interdisciplinary approaches to the study of culture", with particular attention to the "academia and society" approach (Neumann and Nunning, 2012: 11), which examines the journey across academic discourse and social practice.

The earliest circulation of the term 'gender' in Egypt goes back to the early 1990s when it started appearing in various United Nations documents; while its first wide-range public use accompanied the United Nations Commission on Population and Development Conference (ICPD) that took place in Cairo in 1994. And thus the earliest translations of the term were those provided by translators working for UN offices in Egypt – who came up with the phrase *al-naw' al-ijtima'iyy* (the social kind/type) as a translation of the term. This became the term used mostly in Arabic documents issued by international organisations and some circles within the social sciences – without offering much explanation of the concept itself. Gender soon entered Egyptian academic circles, and was particularly explained as a concept and analytical category mostly by feminist researchers specialised in comparative and cultural studies. Hence Hoda Elsadda's explanatory translation of 'gender' in a phrase in Arabic, equivalent to 'the socio-cultural construction of sex' followed by the term in English. Thus, the two terms used as a translation of gender in Arabic throughout the 1990s reflected different disciplinary contexts. In 1999, a group of Arab scholars at the American University in Cairo (AUC) coined the new term *al-junūsa* as a translation of gender, which they propagated in a special issue of the AUC academic journal *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*

(1999) on gender and knowledge.<sup>5</sup> The term *al-junūsa* was derived from the Arabic tri-literal root (j n s) in parallel to *al-unūta* (femininity) and *al-ḡukūra* (masculinity); yet it did not gain general acceptance by translators who mostly continued to use the earlier equivalents.

It is interesting, however, to note that the past two decades have witnessed an increasing use of the term ‘gender’ transliterated in Arabic as *jender*; and derivatives have been further coined from the word gender, following the rules of Arabic grammar in dealing with it as a quadri-literal root (j n d r). The word has been freely appropriated especially by younger generations of Egyptian feminists who grew up understanding the concept, rather than having it thrust upon them. Thus we find that gender is comfortably used by feminists working in feminist organisations as well as independent feminist writers who use the term in its various derivations in Arabic: reports, essays, articles, social media posts and translations. It is interesting to know however that the earlier term *al-naw‘ al-ijtima‘iyy* has been abbreviated to *al-naw‘*, and is mainly used in international development organisations, in official state discourses, as well as among journalists and academics working in the social sciences.

I have argued elsewhere for the use of ‘*al-jender*’ as an equivalent for the concept ‘gender’,<sup>6</sup> which can be briefly explained in the following points. First of all, using transliteration in Arabic points out the origins of the concept as a foreign that carries its own cultural baggage. Also, the word ‘gender’ in Arabic enjoys the grammatical flexibility as a word having the possible quadri-literal root (j n d r), which allows for further derivation of words such as *jenderiyya* (gendered), etc. Moreover, one of the features of Arabic language is its long history of borrowing, adopting, assimilating and appropriating words and terms from other ‘travelling’ languages. Furthermore, gender as a term and concept has already been appropriated by young Egyptian feminists – which in itself marks a journey within the Egyptian context. Additionally, in academic contexts, and particularly in literary studies, the transliterated term ‘gender’ fits better within literary discourses where the term *al-naw‘* refers more to the literary concept of ‘genre’ than to the socio-cultural concept of ‘gender’. Finally, the term ‘gender’ in transliteration asserts its identity as a ‘travelling concept’.

<sup>5</sup> For more on ‘*al-junūsa*’ as a translation of ‘gender’, see: ‘Editorial’, pp. 6–7. For more on the translation of gender into Arabic, see: Samia Mehrez, ‘Translating Gender’, pp. 106-127.

<sup>6</sup> Hala Kamal, “Translating Women and Gender”, pp. 262–264; and “Translating Feminist Literary Theory into Arabic”, pp. 57-73 (available online: [http://www.ujk.edu.pl/ifp/studia\\_filologiczne/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Translating-Feminist-Literary-Theory-into-Arabic-1.pdf](http://www.ujk.edu.pl/ifp/studia_filologiczne/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Translating-Feminist-Literary-Theory-into-Arabic-1.pdf)).

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**5. Conclusion: the politics of translatability**

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I view the issue of translating 'gender' in the wider context of translating feminist discourse, where the issues of "language and gender, women's troubling relationship with language, have emerged as a central preoccupation of feminist theory and in the translation of women writers" (Godard, 1990: 87). In her groundbreaking article first published in 1988, "Theorizing Feminist Discourse/Translation", Barbara Godard raises a number of questions that continue to be valid today, concerning the translation of feminist theory "in the framework of language, gender and ideology" (87). She asks questions about the relationship between feminist theories and translation studies; the translated text as an equivalent or transformed text; the visibility of the translation process (87). Thinking about the translation of feminism and gender – theory and concept – in light of Godard's discussion of feminist translation, highlights the problem of the translatability of travelling concepts such as 'gender'. Being a travelling concept that originated in Western academia and circulated via 'international' institutions, the term 'gender' seems untranslatable in many languages which opt for the word 'gender' (as used in English) as a translation/transliteration of the concept of gender. What counts, however, is not the adoption of the word/term, as much as the process that leads to this choice. In the context of Arabic language, and particularly in the Egyptian context, the journey of 'gender' as a travelling concept is significant in the way it illuminates the importance of socio-cultural and political contexts in resisting, settling, and/or adopting travelling concepts – especially when juxtaposing 'feminism' with 'gender'. In conclusion, this article sought to establish a connection between feminist theory and translation practice in light of the notions of travelling theories and concepts developed in cultural studies. I have also tried to show examples of feminist problematisation of translation, in recognition of the politics involved in translation processes, and the implications of translatability – not merely as a linguistic exercise, but as a cultural process, and a feminist praxis.

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#### *The author*

**Hala Kamal (PhD)** is Professor of English Literature and Gender Studies at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University. She teaches undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Autobiography, Women's Writing, and Translation Studies. Her research interests and publications in both English and Arabic are in the areas of feminist literary criticism, autobiography theory, women and gender studies, and the history of the Egyptian feminist movement. She has also translated several books on gender and feminism into Arabic. (<https://cairo.academia.edu/HalaKamal>)