An Example of Self-translation: The Case of Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl

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Abstract

In this paper we would like to introduce the special case of the Syrian female author Samar Attar, who started writing her novels in Arabic and later in English, as an apparent case of self-translation. However, I would like to highlight the case of this author as a special one, since she does not translate her poems and books but she does a re-writing of her works, carrying out a cultural adapting task from the original Arabic into English. This task involves several areas, namely, the linguistic, the religious, the social and even the political and the ideological. The aim of this paper is then to analyse, from a translational point of view, some fragments of the English novel, accounting for the Arabic cultural roots, where we can appreciate specific critical issues. For this purpose, we will focus mostly on the novel Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl, the second book of a trilogy, the third part of which has not been published yet. The novel describes the growing up of a young girl in Damascus, Syria, in the shade of military governments, during the 50s and 60s, to the extent that she is determined to leave Syria. Throughout the analysis of this novel, which is also autobiographical, we will discuss how the three different strata of the Arabic novel (the familiar, the social and the political environments), have been dealt with in the English version.

Keywords: Self-translation, Arabic, English, Literature, Female author, Novel.

Introduction

Samar Attar, like most of the authors belonging to Al-Mahgar’s Generation, is an apparent case of self-translation. This practice started at the beginning of the 20th century in the United States by the hand of a group of emigrate Arabic writers who translated their own works from Arabic into English and from English into Arabic. Also to this phenomenon belong those works by contemporary authors, such as Ġubrān Ǧalīl Ġubrān, Mīḥā’īl Nu’aymah, Mīḥā’īl Naṣīb ʿArīḍah or Iliyā Abū Māḍī, among others.

The extensive literary production of Attar, born in Damascus, includes books in both English and Arabic concerning literary criticism, translation, language teaching and creative writing. Attar’s poems have appeared in several anthologies in England and Canada, among which we may mention The Penguin Book of Women Poets (London, 1978) and Women of the Fertile Crescent (Washington, 1981). Her most recent publication has been The Vital Roots of European Enlightenment (2008), about the influence of philosopher Ibn Tufayl.

Her education has been liberal and open-minded, conspicuously free from intrusive restrictions and censorship. As [1] points out: ‘as a writer/translator myself, whose roots are very deep in Arabic language and culture, but also in American and European cultures, I am one of those exceptions who do not fit any specific pattern drawn by translation theorists and practitioners. Although I grew up in Damascus Syria where Arabic was spoken, and Arabic culture was reinforced in school and society, I am equally at home with American English as a language, and American, French and German cultures.’

These self-translated works into another language are a serious attempt to spread their works from the Arabic culture into the Anglo-Saxon and to exclude and avoid the ideological and cultural conditionings underlying the re-writing process. However, the case of Samar Attar is completely different and very special, as she has translated her own works because of the strong critique she received on the part of literary critics and
reactionaries on account of her sense of freedom in the use of the Arabic language.

This is the main reason why the Arabic countries stopped the spread of her novels and the critics never included her in the canon of contemporary Arabic writers. In her self-translations, the author develops a transcultural adapting task involving several levels, i.e. the linguistic, the religious, the social, including the political and the ideological. This is what we are going to analyze with this paper.

The Novels

Her two novels written so far are mainly autobiographical, although the main character (the same young woman in both novels) appears under the name of Lina, the name of Attar’s actual daughter. She reveals the identity of the middle-class woman in Syria, and more concretely, in Damascus, as well as the kind of education received by young women and their not always easy relationships with their parents. All these events are also placed against the background of the political and cultural changing conditions during the 50’s and the 60’s in Syria.

As she herself admits, her influences are not to be found in the previous modern literature (James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Anton Chéjov, Franz Kafka, Robert Walser, Gibran Khalil Gibran, Mikhail Nu’aymah, and so on), but also in the concrete social, political and religious environment, as can be appreciated from her analysis of the two novels: The House on Arnus Square and Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl [2] [3].

The House on Arnus Square

This novel, confessedly inspired in a short story entitled Das Ende der Welt by the Swiss writer Robert Walser, is the first novel, as the author herself states, of a planned trilogy covering the familiar history of the main character and her personal experiences since she left Syria and moved to the West. It was written in Arabic in West Berlin in 1984 and published in Sydney in 1988. It is about the experiences that Lina undergoes in her frequent returns to her home in ‘Arnūs square, where she was born. She tells about herself in first person and about the daily life of the three women, two sisters (Rima and Bahiya) and the maid (Fattum), who have been living there for fifty years. Lina returns to her native home twenty years after her self-exile in some western (European and American) countries.

Although she has spent a long time in other places, Lina is always yearning to come back to her first home in Damascus, but she suffers from a great disappointment, as she finds no remains that she can remember. The narrator provides the reader with countless and precise descriptions of her “house”, its inhabitants, its surroundings, etc., and she even goes further in her account when she discovers all the intrigues hidden behind the links she had established with her own home.

Her experiences give evidence of such contradictory meanings that terms like “house” and “home” acquire: the place where one lives, the country to which one belongs, the shelter where one hides, and, unfortunately, even a prison where Lina, her sisters and the maid believe themselves locked up, as the next paragraph suggests: ‘For Fattum, our Damascene house was a shelter, a prison or a paradise. In it, we told her not to eat from that tree; the tree of good and evil, and we warned if she did she would die. She lived with us for forty-five years till she reached her sixties and she never tasted the fruits of that forbidden tree.’

Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl

This novel, on which our analysis is focused, represents the second book of the trilogy, the third part of which has not been published yet. The author follows the models of the autobiographical novels, especially the complex and dialectical process of development of other writers in her early years of education, in conflict with her religious and political milieu, in a way similar to James Joyce’s A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man, to which it bears some obvious resemblances, and not merely to the title.

In this novel, Attar describes how a Damascene young girl grows up under the shadow of the military governments during the 50s and the beginning of the 60s, until she decides to move away from Syria. The author tells us about the contradictions arising between Lina and the social and political environment that surrounds her. Finally, everything will end up with her regretful refusal of her family, her religion and even her own country:

[...] ‘Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl describes the growing up of a young girl in Damascus, Syria, under the shadow of military governments during the fifties and early sixties, up to the point of her decisions to leave Syria. The novel depicts an artist’s struggle against her environment, ending repression that Lina leaves behind still exist in the Middle East today.’
The violence and repression that Lina denounces, as deep critical elements throughout the book, are still present in the Middle East, which is one of the reasons why this novel has been banned in Syria and in other Arabic countries. Samar Attar expresses this point as follows:

[...] Few Arabs have read my two novels in Arabic, or have heard about me. My novels are not distributed in Arab countries. Critics never include me with other Arab writers [...] If it were not for censorship I might not have translated my work from one language into the other. But censorship was and still is the reason that forced me to use translation as a strategy to assert my voice as a writer, and to avoid the fate of exiled artists who see themselves as ‘ghost or memories’.

The novel is divided into three main sections, each of them devoted to the three stages of Lina’s life: her childhood, her adolescence and her womanhood. It starts when Fattum, the maid, goes together with Lina to the dining-room to meet the rest of the family (her mother, her four sisters, her only brother and other members) with the purpose of celebrating a dinner because of her father’s death, an event that provokes a great astonishment in Lina. This dinner involves quite opposite values and ideas among the different members of the family, making reference above all to some conflicts based on religious, politics, social classes, sexual repression and the special relationships between men and women, developed throughout the whole novel.

According to the author, _Lina_ is structured in several levels. At the personal one, the novel describes the life of a Damascene middle class young girl in the 50s, her education at national schools and at the university and her political flirtation with communist and socialist student groupings. At the social level, the book describes the relationships among different Syrian social classes which have actually not undergone many changes to the present, in spite of all the attempts of reform carried out.

**Why Translating _Lina_: A Portrait of a Damascene girl. Religious Examples from the English Novels**

As we have stated previously, Samar Attar’s literary production inevitably leads to the issue of censorship in her texts of the Arabic culture, the limitations in her creative process and the later re-elaboration into another language, English.

In this novel, we may distinguish three different strata, quite relevant for Lina’s life:

- **The familiar scope**, the development of her own personality in the concrete social setting of her family and her close friends.
- **The social background**, the confrontation with the repressive forces in a quite difficult social and political framework.
- **The political level**, that is to say, the international politics of the Islamic world in Middle East, where the ideological aspect acquires some nuances of confrontation, refusal and, finally, exile and alienation.

Bearing in mind these distinct strata, _Lina_ could also be considered a literary, social and political essay about Syria in the 50s and 60s. The may concern of the book lies on the problems of the country which still prevail nowadays. It describes the different military _coup d’etat_ by Syria from the end of the forties, as well as the rise to power of the radical left wing after the British-French-Israeli invasion of Sinai at the end of 1956 and the final euphoria as a consequence of the unity between Syria and Egypt in 1958, under the leadership of Gamal Abdannasser, followed by the last failure and the subsequent dissolution of the United Arab Republic. During this time, Lina was a university graduate with an intensive artistic activity who decides to leave the country forever.

Below, we will give samples of English texts excerpts which are quite characteristic of her feeling of disappointment that overcomes the main character. As an adult in exile, Lina recovers the uprooting she has experienced since she was a child, not only from a religious point of view, but from a political, social and even familiar scope, as we will confirm in the texts that will follow. As there are many of texts which can be quite useful examples of this censorship, we will focus mainly on the religious aspect, without forgetting any reference to the other texts. Throughout these texts, we will study the narrative elements used by the author who creates a tremendous and powerful character by means of a careful selection of the language used in order to narrate the fictional events.

With the pervasive use of certain narrative motifs, such as the religious or the political ones, and, mainly, with the use of the omniscient third person narrator who knows everything that occurs in Lina’s conscience, the character provides the reader a great number of value judgements as
displayed all along the novel. Lina’s insistence lies in her frustrating wish to know why God has taken his father with him. For her, there cannot be only a merciful God if he had acted in this way. The God who has taken her father away has been the wicked one. Although these thoughts are common to any child, they mean a direct attack against the Islamic religious principles. However, we can distinguish in the text two different levels: that of the Lina herself itself as a child, and that of Lina as an adult, which underlies the previous one.

As we have stated above, Lina begins with the celebration of her father’s death, what provokes a great shock in the main character. During the dinner, Lina hears the incessant quarrels between her sister Rima and the rest of the members of the family. She ‘did not understand why everybody was angry’. The room ‘shook under Lina’s feet’. This excerpt is quite significant because of the description the girl makes of her meeting with God:

‘It seemed to her that God was tumbling down onto the table from the ceiling. She pictured His cruel face spattered with blood, His legs covered in dust from the journey. He stretched His lean hand, picked up Rima and breathed into her face. A burning snake burst forth from His mouth. Tightening her eyes, she dropped her sister Rima burst into laughter.

First of all, the treatment Lina made of God is quite representative, as it could become one of the main reasons for this passage to be censored and criticized, as she, from her view as a candid child, makes an exceptional physical description of God: how can a just creature have ‘a cruel face spattered with blood’? When reading the text, we have to take into account the feelings of sadness that besets the main character, as she had just lost his father. Therefore, it is normal that she describes God as a creature having a ‘cruel face spattered with blood’, with a ‘lean hand’, and with ‘a burning snake bursting forth from His mouth’. She feels quite confused, as she is thinking about God, and, undoubtedly, she has been brought up under religious principles, but, at the same time, God has taken away her father. So, she has a mixed of feelings: ‘she didn’t know whether to love Him or dread Him’. She provides the reader with anthropomorphic descriptive elements opposite to the Islamic tradition.

Lina wants to get rid of everything surrounding her, of Damascus, more specifically, and of Syria, of the Arabic country and of Islam. Therefore, she starts making use of anti-religious elements in order to describe her anti-religious attitude. Beside this, she shows herself as a quite conceited personality, as she has been the person who has had the opportunity of meeting God personally, and even of describing Him. It is also significant the change of the point of view produced during the passage. At the beginning, Lina focuses her antagonism on God, describing him with awful derogative adjectives. Later, she feels confused and she does not know her true feelings. Finally, she concentrates on her father and describes the scene in another tone, using positive adjectives instead, like, for instance, ‘radian’.

The feelings and emotions of the main character as an exiled woman underlie the description of this meeting. Here, we can also distinguish the inherent features of the two characters taking part in this passage: whereas Lina represents the modernity, her father represents the Islamic tradition. Therefore, the doubts that beset Lina can be seen as a progressive mechanism and a critical element of the religious matter.

The passage that follows is also interesting, as it shows that the frustration feeling of Lina does not only affect the religious scope, but also the political one. Her sister Rima is the only member who has her own ideas about politics and religion. Perhaps Lina feels closer to her due to the constant confrontations between Rima and the rest of the family. This difference of opinions is clearly stated in this paragraph, when Aunt Samiya and Lina’s brother are accusing Rima of not believing in God because of being communist: ‘Aunt Samiya’s head bent forward; her face was white as wax.

Rima, do you know that communists don’t believe in God, and that churches in their countries are closed?

Rima burst into laughter.
And why do you want us to believe in God, Aunt Samiya? she asked.
Lina saw her brother’s hand rise into the air. But her aunt stretched her torso across the table and gripped his rigid arm. Don’t hit her, she commanded.’

As it can be appreciated, Lina does not only feel a rejection of religion but also of politics. We may find the main reasons for her political refusal as well, namely, the never-ending clashes between Rima and her brother. Lina does not understand why Rima cannot have her own ideas and why her brother has to impose his ideas to the rest of the family.

When her brother tries to physically abuse Rima because of her political and religious thoughts, it is at that moment when Lina understands her situation, and she begins to isolate herself from the world and to create a closer relationship with Rima, as, for her, Rima embodies her feelings. There is again a new dualism, a new opposition between the characters: Rima representing the modernity, as well as Lina (in fact, Rima plays the role of a model and reference for Lina), and the brother, Aunt Samiya and the rest of the family representing the tradition. We may see here how the political aspect begins to replace the religious issue, mainly due to the fact that Lina understands now that politics, and not the religion, is the symbol of modernity.

The next passage is also representative, when Lina goes on questioning the main basis of Islam.

Lina asks her father directly if God would answer her prayers and those of her nanny Fatima. She again casts doubts on her Muslim faith, despite the fact that she was not supposed to have any doubts on this matter if she really believed in her religious creed. However, the last part of the excerpt is also essential due to its implicit religious meaning. First of all, Lina thinks about the possibility of two Gods, and she sets in contrast his different features: merciful vs. wicked; feeds us vs. burns us; His split face: one clear looking half, one ugly half. It is worthy to mention that the ‘clear looking half’ resembles her father, whereas the ‘ugly half’ is a mixture of some features belonging to some members of her family, excluding her mother, her sister Rima and her nanny Fatima, the only people she really loves in the house. On the contrary, Lina does not mention any of the beloved persons when referring to the features of God’s clear looking half, only to her father.

The two halves are also a new dualism that the main character introduces in the novel. However, this dualism is now focused on the traditionalist element: on the one hand, her father, who represents the open traditionalism, that is to say, although he is traditionalist and he believes in tradition, he understands clearly that religion, politics, and even society need a change: he advocates the progress. On the other hand, the brother, Aunt Samiya and the rest of the family represent a more traditionalist traditionalism, that is, they support neither the change nor the progress. For them, everything should be the same, and they should keep the same social status they possess at that moment.

Again, Lina introduces a clearly Islamic element, the figure of the muezzin, that is, a chosen person at the mosque who leads the call to Friday service and the five daily prayers from one of the mosque minarets. The professional muezzin is chosen to serve at the mosque for his good character, voice and skills [4]. Furthermore, Lina makes use of the determiner ‘this’, not only as an exclusion, but also in order to underline or highlight the importance of her question: ‘What does He look...
like, this God?’ and ‘Are there two Gods then in this world?’.

The next passage makes reference to the incessant questions Lina would like to answer. She does not understand why his father’s death has happened or why nobody talks and explains to her where and how her father is. She thinks that her father is in the grave, but she does not know what he should be doing there. The only thing she knew was that he would never come back. Therefore, this fragment is most relevant, as it shows the lack of interest on the part of her family in worrying about Lina’s feelings and thoughts. She has lost her father and nobody pays attention to her because she is only a child:

‘No one had told her what her father was doing in the grave and who would prepare his meals, and whether he would visit her mother from time to time.

All that had happened was the servant assured her he wouldn’t be coming back.
• Did he want to go? Lina asked insistently.
• Of course not. God chose him to be by His side.
• Why didn’t He choose someone else? Aunt Samiya or...

Fatima interrupted her.
• Because he is a good man.
• And Aunt Samiya is not?
• No. No. You are young and you don’t understand what I mean.
• And heaven? Do you know where heaven is, Fatima? Will Daddy wait for us there?

The servant roared with laughter, and Lina resented her. She wanted to know what heaven was and why some people go there, while others go to hell. She remembered what the religion teacher said at school: “If you obey your parents, then you’ll go to heaven”

The first lines of the passage are quite interesting, as she talks from the point of view of a child. The really important problem for her is that she does not know what her father is going to do in the grave. Lina has received religious education but nobody has explained these details to her. Here we are shown again the feeling of disappointment that besets Lina throughout her life. Now, she is not desperate because of her father’s death. Instead, she is worried about the caring of her father. Furthermore, she needs somebody to answer her questions and the only person who tries to answer her is Fatima, the maid.

Fatima, whose name is ironically the name of Muhammad’s daughter, represents another stratum in the novel: the common people. The questions Lina asks are quite difficult to be answered by the maid, probably because of her lack of enough religious education. She tries to explain Lina that her father is a good man, the only reason why God has chosen him to be by his side, but this is not enough to relieve Lina’s grief and sorrows. However, Fatima gives her an account free of any theological burdens. She, as representing the common people, is far from the religious beliefs and biases.

She goes on without discovering the truth or without obtaining a convincing answer. She would like somebody to explain what the heaven was, where it was or why some people would go to heaven and others would go to hell. However, despite the fact that she is a child, she is aware of the opposite values of words such as ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’. Therefore, in this passage, the hand of the author as a child rather than as an adult is clearly apparent to us as readers, as when you are an adult, you are supposed to understand this situation more thoroughly.

This previous passage is strongly linked to the last excerpt we are to analyse here, as both are related to the idea of heaven. Lina pursues an only purpose: to know what the heaven is. Finally, the only person who eventually explains to her not only this idea, but also how God chooses people to be by his side, is her older cousin Rasha:

‘The room was almost dark. Rasha with her flowing white gown looked like a ghost.

• Do you think my father died? Asked Lina hesitantly.
• But you are crazy. Of course he died. All of us will die. Her voice stopped.

Lina thought that Rasha understood things better than she did, because Rasha was older. She was encouraged again.

• Will he go to heaven? She asked. Her heart was beating violently.
• God will put his good deeds and bad deeds on a scale. If the good deeds overweight the bad deeds, then he will undoubtedly go to heaven, said Rasha in a confident voice.

Lina pictured God standing next to a huge scale like the neighbourhood grocer, but His
shop was open day and night. People were rushing in and out.

- But if his bad deeds overweight the good ones? Said Lina hesitantly, then felt ashamed.
- He will go to hell, replied Rasha, then added: Don’t worry. The good deeds will overweight the bad ones.
- What is heaven? Do you know Rasha?

From the hallway came the sound of Uncle Saleh’s footsteps, then the light went off.
• Gardens, Rasha muttered, as if remembering what the religion teacher had told her in school.

• Fig trees? Asked Lina.
• And apples.
• Plums, too?
• And grapes.
• Pears?
• And cherries.

She heard the rivers rush day and night and the bees buzz among the trees.

• The believers will trail their green silky clothes embroidered with gold, said Rasha, yawning in a loud voice, and diving under her sheets.

Lina listened very carefully. She thought her father would look ridiculous in a long green dress.

• And the river of milk and honey? She asked after a while. She couldn’t remember who had told her about it. But Rasha muttered something incomprehensible, then fell sound asleep.

The beginning of the conversation between Lina’s cousin and the main character is quite surprising, when Lina asks directly whether her father is dead. She goes on thinking that, if her father had died, he would have gone to heaven. However, Rasha does not seem to understand her cousin’s question. Lina addresses the burning question to Rasha with reference to her father’s death: Is he dead or else is he with God? This last choice implies that her father is not dead. Rasha understands the question from a theological view: ‘of course he died. All of us will die’. Nevertheless, the piece of information provided by Rasha makes Lina feel encouraged, as she is the only person, together with Fatima, who can supply her with the so longed for answers.

Therefore, Rasha represents another stratum in the novel: the group of people who place themselves in a half position, that is, they do believe in God and they have received a religious education but, despite this fact, they think that religion, politics and society need some changes. She is not as traditionalist as her father, neither as modernist as Lina and her sister Rima. In fact, she left Damascus, although the reason why she left is not so clearly explicit in the novel.

If we pay some attention to the passage, we notice that the first thing Lina wants to know is how God can separate good and evil people. For her, her father has gone to heaven, as this feeling has also been supported by her cousin’s words, so now she is worried about getting to know how heaven is. Both girls describe heaven making reference to religious elements. In this sense, she adopts the term ‘heaven’ as a metaphor of the term ‘Garden of Eden’, as the place where various kinds of trees grow (fig, apple, plum, grape, pear and cherry) as well as many kinds of rivers: “rivers of water, rivers of milk, rivers of wine, rivers of honey” (Qur’an 47: 15) [6]. So, through the last lines, we find that in spite of all the desperation and frustration that accompany Lina, there are some religious grounds in her final attitude, as she accepts the existence of ‘heaven’. However, this element has only an anthropological nature, as she definitely gives up her believing in God and even in politics or in society at large.

Conclusions

Throughout the analysis of the chosen texts, with purely religious nuances, we notice that the desperation Lina feels during most of her life, brings her to exile. Since her father’s death during her childhood, she is pursuing religious answers to all her doubts. However, nobody seems to care about her needs, which creates a feeling of distrust in her that will later turn into a feeling of uneasiness and anxiety about everything around: her family, her society and her religion.

This feeling of helplessness is not only due to the religious conflicts Lina has, but also to the constant clash between her and the rest of the family and her friends. As it can be shown in the previous texts, the reader has to carry out a proleptic reading of the novel, that is to say, while a child, Lina begins to feel a certain rejection about all the imposed issues: the religion, the politics, the society, the role of women in an Arab world, and so on. While a woman, she is forced to exile because she can cope with neither her situation in Damascus nor her role in society. Later, she lives in Western countries, and she
decides to translate her novels into English, taking into account other points of view that she learnt when being exiled. Therefore, she introduces new nuances in Lina’s thoughts and feelings that perhaps they were not so deeply rooted when Lina was a child.

As we have suggested previously, Lina, throughout her life, has met many people holding different points of view about religion, politics and society. This has caused in her a deep feeling of frustration, as she does not really understand why people should think differently. First, she quite disagrees with her father, who represents the religious issue in a traditionalist strain. However, she discovers that the rest of her family is even more traditionalist than her father and that they also support religion in a radical way. Opposite to this position, are Lina’s and her sister Rima’s attitudes: they support modern views, and, therefore, they reject religion in favour of politics? This continuous conflict makes them become political activists, as a symbol of their struggle for defending modernity.

To all this, it is worth adding all the historical ups and downs that occurred in Damascus and determined the political and social ideals of the main character. A few days before her exile from Damascus, Lina is filled with a strong feeling of loathing and rejection that is most relevant in the last pages of the novel. She went into exile as a way of fighting not only against her imposed role in the family, but also against the Syrian regime.

She was unable to accept that women do not play a wrestling role in her country. She wanted to learn, despite the fact that this made her give up everything she had had during her childhood, that is, her family, her circle of friends, her religion and her native country:

‘My mother told me that learning did not help me a bit. On its account, I rejected my family, society, religion, and country.’

Moreover, she ended up by feeling fed up with living in a country where she couldn’t express her own ideas or emotions. She felt as if everybody wanted to ‘buy her soul’. Her exile to Algeria made her feel a free woman. As she states, her exile ‘helped me become a free woman. After Algeria, I didn’t have to wrestle with feelings of guilt for betrayal of my people’. She wanted to find her place in the world: ‘I was tired of being an Arab, a Moslem, and a woman’. There was no relation between the house where she grew up and the city where she was born. For Lina, Damascus had become ‘the garbage city. The rat’s city. Without any trees. Without any gardens. Without any sparrow’.

Undoubtedly, her statements about being tired and being an Arab, a Moslem and a woman have not been readily accepted in the Arabic world. The same may be said about her description of the city, comparing it to a ‘garbage city’ or to ‘the rat’s city’, and to her demands for women’s rights in a world governed exclusively by men [7-25].

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