

Political Prisoners and the Translation of Violence: A Reflexive Case Study of Alaa Abdel Fattah's *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated*

Heba M.I. Metwally

Kent State University, USA

Email: bobba@aucegypt.edu

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0261-2920>

Abstract:

This paper examines the English translation of *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated* (2022) by Alaa Abdel Fattah as a site where political violence, censorship, and collective resistance converge. Compiled and translated by a network of family members, activists, and editors working under conditions of surveillance and risk, the English edition mediates texts written in prison, during probation, or reconstructed from memory after interrogations. The translation does not emerge from a single authorial or professional voice but from a collective process shaped by coercion, fragmentation, and political constraint.

By reading the English edition alongside the Arabic collection *Shabāḥ al-Rabīʿ* (The Ghost of the Spring), the paper explores how editorial and translational decisions both preserve and reshape the political force of Abdel Fattah's testimony. Rather than smoothing rupture, silence, or textual instability, the English translation retains these features, allowing the conditions of repression to remain visible within the translated text itself. Drawing on key concepts from translation studies and cultural theory, including opacity, translator visibility, and narrative control, the paper argues that translation here operates within a sustained tension between reproducing the constraints imposed by state violence and resisting them through fragmentation, collective authorship, and refusal of transparency.

This tension has gained renewed urgency following Abdel Fattah's release in 2025 under international pressure. After his release, he was initially prohibited from leaving Egypt through the imposition of travel restrictions, before later being permitted to travel to the United Kingdom. This sequence highlights how mechanisms of control over movement can persist beyond formal release and how political regulation extends across temporal and spatial boundaries. While Abdel Fattah's physical mobility has been constrained, his translated writings have continued to circulate transnationally.

Through this case study, the paper demonstrates that translating political prisoner testimony is not merely linguistic labor but a critical site where repression, narrative control, and resistance are negotiated across languages and borders.

Keywords: Alaa Abdel Fattah, translation and violence, political prisoners, activist writing, narrative control, transnational circulation

1. Introduction

Translation becomes a site of political struggle when the text being translated is produced under conditions of imprisonment, censorship, and state surveillance. Few contemporary works illustrate this relationship more clearly than *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated* (2022), a collection of essays, statements, and social media writings by the Egyptian activist Alaa Abdel Fattah. Written across years of imprisonment, probation, and political repression, the volume documents not only the experience of incarceration but also the broader struggle over memory, citizenship, and political participation in post-revolutionary Egypt.



Unlike conventional literary translations, the English edition emerged through a collective process involving family members, editors, activists, and unnamed intermediaries who helped preserve and transmit Abdel Fattah's writings under conditions of risk. Many of the texts were smuggled from prison, reconstructed from memory, or circulated through informal networks before publication. As a result, the English volume bears visible traces of the political circumstances that shaped its production.

This paper examines the English translation of *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated* alongside the Arabic collection *Shabāḥ al-Rabīʿ* (*The Ghost of the Spring*). While the two volumes share substantial overlap, they also differ in selection, framing, and paratextual presentation. Following Genette's understanding of paratexts as threshold elements that shape interpretation, these differences raise important questions about how political testimony travels across languages and how translation mediates experiences of censorship, repression, and resistance.

Rather than treating translation as a neutral transfer of meaning, this study approaches it as a process shaped by power relations, editorial decisions, and material constraints. Drawing on scholarship by Baker (2009), Venuti (1995), Spivak (1993), Glissant (1997), Barokka (2022), and Baer (2021), the paper explores how translation preserves, reshapes, and circulates political narratives produced under authoritarian conditions.

The analysis focuses on three interconnected dimensions: the role of translation in challenging state-controlled narratives, the preservation of opacity and fragmentation as traces of political violence, and the significance of collective translation as a form of resistance. Through this case study, the paper argues that translation functions not merely as linguistic mediation but as an extension of political testimony, enabling voices constrained by state power to circulate across linguistic and national boundaries.

2. Paratexts and the Politics of Framing

The paratexts surrounding both the Arabic and English editions play a significant role in shaping how readers encounter Abdel Fattah's writings. Following Genette (1997), paratexts can be understood as threshold elements that guide interpretation before readers engage with the main text. In the case of Abdel Fattah's work, the chronology, forewords, editors' introductions, title pages, and publication histories do more than provide contextual information; they frame the writings as political testimony emerging from conditions of surveillance, imprisonment, and resistance.

The English edition, *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated* (2022), opens with a chronology of modern Egyptian political history, a foreword by Naomi Klein, and an editors' introduction detailing the circumstances under which the writings were produced, preserved, and transmitted. These materials position Abdel Fattah not simply as an author but as a political prisoner whose writings survived censorship and confinement. Klein emphasizes that many texts were written under conditions of imprisonment and reconstructed, transmitted, or preserved despite severe restrictions, while the editors highlight the collective effort required to bring the volume into existence (Klein, 2022; Abdel Fattah, 2022).

The Arabic edition, *Shabāḥ al-Rabīʿ* (*The Ghost of the Spring*), presents a different form of framing. Published in Lebanon in 2022, it addresses an Arabic-speaking readership already familiar with many



of the political events referenced in the essays. Public commentary surrounding the publication of the volume, including Sanaa Seif's announcement of its release, emphasized that the book contains introductory materials written by three Arab writers who situate Abdel Fattah's work within wider regional histories of revolution, repression, and intellectual resistance (Seif, 2022). Rather than introducing Egypt to international readers, these materials participate in an ongoing Arab conversation about memory, defeat, and political responsibility.

The publication of *Shabāḥ al-Rabīʿ* also attracted attention across Arabic-language media and cultural platforms, reflecting the wider regional significance of Abdel Fattah's writings and their circulation beyond Egypt (Abdel Alah Alsalehi, 2022; al-ʿAraby al-Jadeed, 2022; UltraSawt, 2022).

The contrast between the two editions demonstrates how paratexts mediate political meaning across linguistic and cultural contexts. The English edition seeks to make the texts accessible to readers who may be unfamiliar with Egyptian political history, while the Arabic edition assumes a greater degree of shared political and cultural knowledge. Despite these differences, both editions frame the writings as documents of resistance and preserve the connection between personal testimony and collective political struggle. The existence of two differently framed editions also suggests that translation does not simply reproduce a text in another language; it repositions that text within a new interpretive environment.

Particularly significant is the visibility of collective translation in the English volume. The translation is credited to "A Collective," foregrounding the collaborative labor involved in transmitting Abdel Fattah's writings beyond the confines of prison and censorship. This choice challenges the conventional invisibility of translators identified by Venuti (1995) and highlights translation as a political and ethical practice rather than a neutral linguistic transfer. Through these paratextual choices, both editions guide readers toward understanding the text not merely as literature but as an intervention in ongoing struggles over memory, justice, and political representation.

3. Translation, Narrative, and Resistance

The English translation of *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated* does not simply reproduce Abdel Fattah's writings in another language. It reshapes the ways in which those writings circulate, are interpreted, and engage new audiences. The following sections examine three interconnected dimensions of this process: the challenge translation poses to dominant state narratives, the preservation of opacity and fragmentation as traces of political violence, and the role of translation in sustaining political testimony and resistance beyond the conditions that sought to suppress it.

3.1 Narrative control and the state's language of stability

Abdel Fattah's writing emerges from a linguistic landscape structured by the Egyptian state's emphasis on *amn wa istiqrār* ("security and stability") as central civic values. This discourse extends beyond official speeches and legal institutions into media narratives that frame obedience as patriotism and dissent as a threat to national security. Baker's (2009) work on narrative theory helps explain how such narratives operate: political power is sustained not only through coercion but also through the stories that shape public understanding of legitimacy, citizenship, and belonging.



State-aligned media figures play an important role in reinforcing this framework. Television hosts such as Ahmed Moussa and Mostafa Bakry have repeatedly described political opponents and activists as *khawāna* (“traitors”), contributing to a discourse that divides society into loyal citizens and perceived enemies of the state. Such language does not merely describe political conflict; it actively constructs moral boundaries that delegitimize dissent.

Against this narrative, Abdel Fattah advances a vocabulary centered on *karāma* (dignity), *hurriyya* (freedom), and *‘adāla* (justice). These concepts recur throughout both the Arabic and English editions and offer an alternative understanding of political participation and collective responsibility. The English translation preserves many of these terms rather than replacing them with simplified equivalents, allowing readers to encounter the ethical language of the Egyptian revolutionary movement on its own terms.

Translation therefore functions as more than linguistic transfer. By carrying Abdel Fattah’s writings beyond the reach of the institutions that seek to marginalize them, the English edition challenges dominant narratives and enables alternative political memories to circulate transnationally. In Baker’s terms, translation becomes a form of narrative intervention, linking localized experiences of repression to wider conversations about justice, citizenship, and resistance.

3.2 Opacity, silence, and the ethics of translation

Many of Abdel Fattah’s essays bear visible traces of the conditions under which they were written. Some were composed in prison, others were reconstructed from memory, and many emerged under circumstances shaped by surveillance, uncertainty, and restricted communication. These conditions are reflected not only in what the texts say but also in how they are written. Abrupt shifts in tone, fragmented reflections, and moments of silence appear throughout the collection and remain visible in the English translation.

Glissant’s (1997) concept of opacity offers a useful way of understanding these textual features. Rather than treating difficulty or incompleteness as problems to be corrected, Glissant argues for the right of individuals and communities not to be fully transparent to dominant systems of interpretation. From this perspective, the gaps and discontinuities that appear in Abdel Fattah’s writing can be read not as failures of expression but as reminders of the conditions under which testimony is produced.

The English translation generally avoids smoothing these irregularities. Instead of presenting a fully coherent narrative of imprisonment and resistance, it preserves many of the tensions and uncertainties that characterize the original writings. This decision is significant because political repression often seeks to control not only speech but also the terms through which experience becomes intelligible. Preserving fragmentation allows the translation to retain traces of that struggle.

This approach also resonates with Barokka’s (2022) discussion of refusal and the limits of accessibility. Barokka argues that demands for complete legibility can reproduce forms of control by requiring marginalized subjects to make themselves fully available to outside interpretation. In Abdel Fattah’s case, not everything can be explained, translated, or contextualized without loss. The translation therefore respects certain silences and ambiguities rather than attempting to resolve them.



Spivak's (1993) call for ethical attentiveness to the text further clarifies this choice. Ethical translation involves listening to the particularities of a voice rather than reshaping it to meet the expectations of a new audience. In preserving uncertainty, fragmentation, and opacity, the English edition carries across not only Abdel Fattah's words but also the conditions that made those words necessary.

3.3 Translation as political testimony and resistance

The English translation of *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated* does more than carry Abdel Fattah's writings into another language; it transforms the conditions under which they can be read. Many of the essays were written in prison, reconstructed from memory, or transmitted through informal networks operating under conditions of surveillance and risk. As a result, the translation inherits the marks of coercion embedded in the original texts. Rather than erasing these traces, the English edition preserves them, allowing readers to encounter testimony shaped by imprisonment, censorship, and political struggle.

The collective nature of the translation is central to this process. Credited to "A Collective," the English edition foregrounds the collaborative labor involved in preserving and circulating Abdel Fattah's writings. As Venuti (1995) argues, translation is often expected to conceal its own mediation. Here, however, mediation remains visible. The translators, editors, family members, and unnamed intermediaries who contributed to the volume become part of the story of transmission itself. Translation emerges not as a neutral act of linguistic transfer but as a practice of solidarity through which testimony survives.

The political significance of this process becomes particularly visible in Abdel Fattah's reflections on the persistence of repression after the Egyptian revolution. Essays such as "Impossible Solutions," "The Hostage State," and "History Repeating Itself" describe how structures of authority continue to operate through legal, judicial, and military institutions even when political circumstances appear to change (Abdel Fattah, 2022). Translation carries these reflections beyond their original context, enabling readers outside Egypt to engage with debates about memory, accountability, and political continuity.

Across both the Arabic and English editions, Abdel Fattah's writings insist that political struggle does not end when a revolution is declared defeated. Instead, memory itself becomes a site of resistance. By preserving references to repression, loss, disappointment, and unfinished political aspirations, the translation resists narrative closure. In Baker's (2009) terms, it creates connections between localized experiences of violence and broader transnational conversations about justice and resistance.

Following Abdel Fattah's release in 2025, restrictions on his ability to leave Egypt underscored the persistence of political control beyond imprisonment. Yet while his movement remained constrained, his writings continued to circulate through translation, reaching audiences beyond the limits imposed on him (Lewis, 2025).

Translation therefore functions as more than representation. It extends the circulation of testimony beyond the spatial and political constraints imposed on the writer. While states may restrict movement,



ensor publications, or suppress dissent, translated texts can continue to travel. In this sense, the English edition *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated* becomes part of the struggle it documents, preserving memory, challenging erasure, and sustaining political dialogue across linguistic and national borders.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the English translation of *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated* as a site where political violence, narrative control, and resistance intersect. Through its paratexts, collective translation practices, and preservation of textual fragmentation, the volume demonstrates that translation is not merely a linguistic transfer but a process shaped by the material conditions under which testimony is produced and circulated.

The comparison between the English edition and the Arabic collection *Shabāh al-Rabīʿ* highlights how translation repositions political writing within new linguistic and cultural contexts while preserving its connection to ongoing struggles over memory, justice, and representation. Rather than smoothing rupture or resolving ambiguity, the English translation retains many of the traces of censorship, imprisonment, and political constraint that shaped Abdel Fattah's writings.

The analysis has shown that translation functions simultaneously as mediation and resistance. It challenges dominant narratives, preserves experiences that might otherwise be erased, and enables political testimony to travel beyond the boundaries imposed by the state. In the case of Abdel Fattah's writings, translation becomes part of the struggle it documents, extending the circulation of memory and dissent across languages and borders.

In sum, *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated* demonstrates that the work of testimony does not end with the original text. Translation allows that testimony to acquire new audiences, new political meanings, and new forms of solidarity, ensuring that voices constrained by repression continue to be heard beyond the conditions that sought to silence them.

Declarations and Acknowledgement:

The author received no external funding for this research.

The author would like to acknowledge Alaa Abdel Fattah, whose writings inspired this study and whose reflections on imprisonment, resistance, and political memory provided the foundation for this research. The author is also grateful to Dr. Brian James Baer, academic advisor at Kent State University, whose work on the translation of carceral narratives helped shape the analytical perspective adopted in this paper. Special thanks are also extended to Dr. Teresa Villa-Ignacio, whose course on Translation and Violence encouraged critical engagement with the relationship between language, power, and political struggle.

The author is solely responsible for the conception, analysis, and writing of this paper.

The author declares no conflict of interest.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

References

- Abdel Alah Alsalehi. (2022). *Shabāḥ al-ḥurriya: Kitāb al-nāshiḥ al-miṣrī al-mu'taqal 'Alā' 'Abd al-Fatāḥ* [Ghost of freedom: The imprisoned Egyptian activist Alaa Abdel Fattah's book]. Monte Carlo Doualiya. <https://www.mc-doualiya.com/-شبح-الحرية-كتاب-الناشط-المصري-برامج/قرأنا-لكم-20220828-المعتقل-علاء-عبد-الفتاح>
- Abdel Fattah, A. (2022). *Shabāḥ al-Rabī': Mukhtārāt min maqālātihi wa-tadwīnātihi wa-ḥiwārātihi wa-aqwāluhi amām al-niyābāt wa-al-mahākīm* [The ghost of the spring: Selected articles, posts, interviews, and statements before prosecutors and courts]. Jusoor for Translation and Publishing.
- Abdel Fattah, A. (2022). *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated: Selected works 2011–2021*. Seven Stories Press.
- al-'Araby al-Jadeed. (2022). Yahya Fikri: *A publisher whose "crime" was discussing a book by Alaa Abdel Fattah* <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/culture/%D9%8A%D8%AD%D9%8A%D9%89-%D9%81%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%87-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%B4%D8%A9-%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AD>
- Baer, B. (2021). Gulag translations and Cold War antinomies: Notes for a reflexive Translation Studies. *STRIDON: Studies in Translation and Interpreting*, 1(1), 9–32. <https://doi.org/10.4312/stridon.1.1.9-32>
- Baker, M. (2009). *Resisting State Terror: Theorizing Communities of Activist Translators and Interpreters, Globalization, Political Violence and Translation*, Palgrave, Macmillan.
- Barokka, K. (2022). *Right to Access, Right of Refusal: Essays on Translation and Disability Justice*. Tilted Axis Press.
- Glissant, É. (1997). *Poetics of Relation* (B. Wing, Trans.). University of Michigan Press.
- Lewis, A. (2025, September 22). *Alaa Abd el-Fattah, the jailed Egyptian-British dissident pardoned by Sisi*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/who-is-abd-el-fattah-jailed-egyptian-british-dissident-who-may-soon-be-pardoned-2025-09-09/>
- Moussa, A. (2025). *'Alā mas'ūliyyatī* [On my responsibility] [Television program]. Sada El Balad. <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/20NnHvOnd3k>
- Seif, S. @sanaaseif. (2022). *Announcement of the Arabic publication of Shabāḥ al-Rabī'* [Tweet]. X (formerly Twitter). <https://x.com/Monasosh/status/1553141147651956736>
- Spivak, G. C. (1993). "The Politics of Translation." In *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (pp. 179–200). Routledge.
- UltraSawt. (2022). *Shabāḥ al-Rabī': Ghost of the spring: Selections from the writings of Alaa Abdel Fattah*. <https://www.ultrasawt.com/>
- Venuti, L. (1995). *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. Routledge.