

**The Postcolonial Arabic Novel:
Debating Ambivalence**

Muhsin Jassim Al-Musawi
Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003. 432 pages.

Muhsin Jassim Al-Musawi's book offers a fresh contribution not only to studies in Arabic literature but also to postcolonial critique, cultural criticism, comparative literature, and cross-cultural studies. Its interest lies in the fact that it introduces a relatively less explored territory in post-colonial thought and cultural criticism: namely, Arabic literature. The attention of many western and non-western scholars in the field has long

been directed toward Anglophone literature from South Asia, Japan, Africa, and Canada, and then to Francophone literature from North Africa and the Antilles.

In the context of the Arab world, the author also situates the importance of his study in how *The Thousand and One Nights*, a work whose fate and reception he sees as emblematic of the fate of fiction writing in the Arab world, was received. Just like the novel genre in general, this work only received scholarly interest rather recently, after centuries of neglect and disdain by conservatist Arab scholars and elite culture.

Central to postcolonial critique, whose sources and precedents can be traced to the practices and discourses of those writers associated with various intellectual traditions (e.g., poststructuralism, deconstruction, Marxism, feminism, cultural studies) and which has affinities with the literary movement known as postmodernism, is the experience of colonization as a moment of cultural self-consciousness and self-dividedness. This moment generates contradictory and ambivalent identity patterns and subject positions resulting from the encounter with the Other (culture), and emphasizes the *constructedness* of identity. Al-Musawi transposes these key postcolonial motifs and insights to the realm of Arabic literature in order to reveal important dimensions of the contemporary Arabic novel.

Scholarly research on Arabic literature (both within and outside the Arab world) often privileged poetry as an object of study, given its historically prominent place in elite culture and the Arab world's literary canon. The subject choice of the book is of particular interest, because it targets the Arabic novel as an emerging literary genre, and, by the same token, because of its use of postcolonial analytical concepts to account for this relatively new literary genre's place in contemporary Arab culture and society.

The subject is expounded over ten chapters, and is accompanied by an introduction, a page listing abbreviations and editorial notes, and a conclusion, bibliography, and index. The bibliography is appropriately organized according to useful document categories of books in both English and Arabic. The author systematically provides full references for the works cited, and valuable footnotes to further contextualize his subject matter, offer explicative remarks and annotations, and make cross-references. Although he uses the Library of Congress transliteration system for Arabic names and titles, between parentheses he provides the more common European spelling for Arabic authors' names, as well as an English translation of Arabic book titles, for easy recognition by readers not used to the transliterated form.

The book's thematic emphasis is that the Arabic novel is an "awakening genre." The author seeks to canvass the various ways in which the modern Arabic novel takes shape and interacts with the sociocultural as well as historical contexts, especially since the *nahdah* (the Arab awakening of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) to this day. In his perspective, the novel's engagement with the context manifests itself through its self-conscious portrayal of its sociocultural universe. The book covers specific cases of well-known, as well as lesser known, Arab writers from North Africa, the Middle East, Egypt, Sudan, and the Gulf states. Arabic narrative is seen as a site of dynamic explorations of several issues, including "identity formation, the modern nation-state, individualism, nationalism, gender and class demarcations, and micro-politics" (p. 1). These postcolonial issues constitute the organizing themes for the book's ten chapters.

The book's point of departure is to foreground the literary figure of Scheherazade, the legendary female narrator of *The Thousand and One Nights*, as a central trope in understanding and situating Arabic fiction. The author argues that Scheherazade is a significant "decolonizing" trope and that her voice (in the framing tale of *The Thousand and One Nights*) is a prototype of modern Arabic narratives of contestation, protest, dissidence, and revolt that operate within the setting of repressive ideological regimes. He identifies such postmodernist aesthetic practices as parody, pastiche, irony, satire, sarcasm, ambivalence, fragmentary style, and several other related narrative features and strategies as the chief producers of counter-narratives and revisionist readings of history. The effect of such narrative procedures is twofold: the escape from censorship and the emergence of alternative voices and determinants of selfhood. The idea of *The Thousand and One Nights* as an ancestor of the modern Arabic novel is underlined throughout the book. The author links the modern Arab novel's birth to the growing interest in this book, which started when it was reclaimed as "literature" during the post-Arab awakening period by such leading Arab writers of the time as Taha Hussain.

The study's strengths are its well-defined thesis, its brilliant use of *The Thousand and One Nights* and its main narrator (Scheherazade) to provide insightful readings of the Arabic novel, and how it secured its place in the canon in recent history, as if heralding a new age of Arabic literature and culture. Despite the book's thematic unity and sense of depth, one observes several limitations. Aside from the fact that the work needs more editing

(confusing punctuation or unedited grammatical structures), theoretical documentation seems at times derivative and eclectic.

Another issue is that the title is problematic when the book's rather ambitious agenda is taken together with the actual content: Using Arabic in the title raises certain expectations with regard to the novels and writers to be selected and covered. The study, however, never quite explicitly explains how the term is to be understood, for the author uses it both to provide readings of novels written in Arabic and to discuss novels written by Arab writers of French expression. As a case in point, the Algerian female writer Assia Djebar, who is known mainly as a writer of French expression, is often cited in the book, and analysis of her work joins the stream of central arguments developed about novels written in Arabic, with no justification for this choice on the author's part. The same thing goes for Algerian writer Rachid Boujedra, a professed bilingual writer, who made a linguistic choice only later in his career by switching from writing in French to writing in Arabic for ideological reasons.

One also cannot help but wonder why Al-Musawi makes no reference to the ideological implications of the Arab novelist's choice of Arabic as a language of expression when it is a crucial element of discussing the post-colonial Arabic novel as an "awakening" genre. In many cases, the post-colonial Arab novelist operates in a context where literature is produced either in Arabic or in the official language used by the colonizer (English or French). In some more complex instances, like the one of Moroccan writer Abdellatif Laâbi (writer and translator of his own work from French to Arabic), both languages are equally assumed and adopted. The post-colonial Arab novelist's choice of language is therefore ideologically marked and sometimes a highly ambiguous act, for it reflects his or her strategy to come to terms with the identity dilemma that he or she faces as a result of the colonial experience. In a similar vein, a reader's expectations may be frustrated when glancing at the chapter treating works by Moroccan writers of Arabic expression, since some key figures whose work was historically groundbreaking and central in paving the way for such postcolonial novels have been dropped (e.g., Mohammed Choukri and Abdellatif Laâbi).

The debate on the problem of language in postcolonial fiction by Arab, and for that matter postcolonial, writers is still ongoing. Thus, it would be reductive and certainly ironic to gloss over this important question when studying the postcolonial Arabic novel. Nevertheless, the book leaves the reader with interesting perspectives on the postcolonial Arabic

novel and gains in vigor due to its fitting appropriation of key postcolonial motifs to situate the Arabic novel in the context of contemporary Arab society, politics, and culture.

Safoi Babana-Hampton
Ph.D. Candidate in Modern French Studies
Department of French and Italian
University of Maryland College Park
College Park, Maryland