

Panel 37: The migrating subject: displacement, self-discovery and nostalgia at the core of modern and contemporary Arabic novel and autobiography

Friday 18, 14.45-17.25, Aula A9

Convenors: **Maria Elena Paniconi** (University of Macerata), **Martina Censi** (Université de Liège / University of Urbino)

Discussant: **Samuela Pagani** (University of Salento)

This panel aims at exploring the impact of the migratory experience on the modern and contemporary Arabic literary creativity. The literary production of the Mahjar literati of the XXth century – such as Amin Rihani, Jubran Khalil Jubran and Mikhail Nu'ayma – largely developed a cluster of tropes related to the migratory experience, contributing to shape a modern Arab sensibility intimately linked to the sense of loss, alienation, displacement and often framed in a nostalgic reading of the past. But even beyond the Mahjar's experience, the migrating subject – characterized by his/her complex location, alienation, outsidership, self-discovery – is still a central theme in modern, contemporary and current literature. Besides providing literary representation of migrating subjects whose identities are characterized by a multi-tiered membership (Yuval-Davis), contemporary Arabic literature draws new meanings from the modern tradition by deconstructing and creating alternative narratives to the dominant National narrative. Migrant subjects, in both fictional and autobiographical writing, negotiate their “in-between” location (Homi Bhabha), contributing to a re-questioning of normative ways of subjectivation and identification. Self-discovery continues to be intimately linked to the travel narrative as it was in the very first stage of the literary canon (Sabri Hafez), and nostalgia helps at shaping an idea of the past and of the future, in terms of individuality and collectivity, and stands often as a bespeaking allegory of that widely discussed “Arab crisis” with regard to politics and identity (Wen Chin Ouyang). Through a multi-disciplinary approach and conjugating textual criticism with socio-literary analysis and cultural, gender and media studies, this panel aims at tackling a series of questions as such: 1) Re-envisioning Mahjar(s): the migratory experience at the core of the modern sensibility; 2) The role of migratory experience and the making of post-national narratives; 3) Migration as a literary trope: the migrating subject as a catalyst of modern alienation, displacement and uncertain identity; 4) Migration and gender identity: the experience of migration as a mean of questioning normative gender roles.

Paper givers:

- 1) **Maria Elena Paniconi** (Università di Macerata), ***Cities without palms by Tarek Eltayeb at the crossroad of literary traditions***

My paper will focus on the seminal work *Cities without Palms* by Tarek Eltayeb, a novel that can be read as a story of migration and self-discovery. Tarek Eltayeb was born in Cairo in 1959, the son of Sudanese parents. He has been living in Austria since 1984 and he is the author of two novels and several collections of short-stories and poetries. *Cities without Palms*, Eltayeb's first novel, stands at the crossroad of several literary traditions. The personal development and the journey of Hamza – this is the name of the young protagonist

– from Sudan to Europe via Egypt, Italy, France and Holland, evoke at once the literature of the Sudanese diaspora, the modern Arab Bildungs-narrative, the global travel literature, and the rural and Egyptian canonical novel. In my analysis, which will include an interview with the author, I will try to highlight how the evolution of the young character in the novel is made possible exactly by these intertwined dimensions, each one of them conferring to this slender book a specific extra-meaning. By combining a close reading analysis and a distant reading approach, I will eventually situate this piece of work in the contemporary Arab literary field, understanding this novel as an opportunity to think about a post-national Arab narrative (Ouyang).

2) **Martina Censi** (Université de Liège / University of Urbino), *Amīn Rīḥānī's Mulūk al-'arab: literature, displacement and the quest for a modern identity*

Amīn Rīḥānī is one of the most renowned Mahjar literati of the beginning of the 20th century. Born in Lebanon in 1876, he left for America at the age of twelve. His engagement in the nationalist debate and in the quest for a modern Arab identity is deeply marked by his multifaceted personal identity – as a migrant subject – that reflects also on his literary work. His personal search for a modern Arab identity is also a political quest for the unity of the Arab world. This is particularly evident in his travel narrative *Mulūk al-'arab*, in which Rīḥānī relates his discovery journey across the Arab world. This paper focuses on the first volume of *Mulūk al-'arab*, dedicated to Rīḥānī's journey across the Arabian Peninsula, considered as a mythical place of the origin of the Arab civilization. According to his special status of migrant subject, Rīḥānī's identity is characterized by a multiple membership, at once territorial and literary. Literature and displacement are the two main elements that inform Rīḥānī's personal search for his identity and membership as well as his political search for the identity of an Arab world entering modernity. In this personal and political quest, Rīḥānī metaphorically moves between different literary traditions – the Arabic literary tradition of his origins and the European and American context. This literary and territorial displacement challenges the idea of a fixed and normative identity based on the rigid opposition between tradition-East versus modern-West, authenticity versus imitation, past versus present. As represented in *Mulūk al-'arab*, Rīḥānī's in-between standpoint (Bhabha) suggests the possibility of a modern personal and political identity founded on a multiple intellectual and territorial membership characterized by the circulation and dissemination of texts, literary traditions, intellectuals and openness to diversity. Such strategic, migrant identity questions the idea of a normative identity founded on the membership to a community like a religious minority, a political party or a territorial-defined nation-state.

3) **Miloud Gharrafi** (Ecoles de St-Cyr Coëtquidan/Toulouse 2), *Le retour dans le roman arabe de la migration*

Dans la littérature universelle, depuis Homère (*L'Eliade*) jusqu'à M. Kundera (*L'ignorance*), le retour du migrant fut un sujet brûlant et compliqué. Le premier a mis en scène le retour d'Ulysse à Ithaque et la déception qu'il a éprouvée devant l'indifférence et la méconnaissance des siens. Le second dresse l'image du retour des immigrés tchèques dans leur pays d'origine après la chute du bloc communiste en Europe de l'Est. Les deux textes abordent le retour comme un acte dramatique dans la mesure où l'image entretenue du pays

d'origine pendant les longues années d'exil ou de migration s'effondre devant une nouvelle réalité dans laquelle l'ancien émigré se sent encore plus étranger qu'en terre d'immigration. Cette problématique n'est pas étrange au roman arabe de la migration. Elle a des échos, à degré différents, dans plusieurs romans arabes de la migration. La notion du retour est fréquemment évoquée (Mostapha Chaabane, Alya Mamdouh, Mohamed El-Bisatie...) mais rarement concrétisée (Rachid Ninni, Hamed Kahal, Abderrahmane Abid). Même dans les romans où le retour n'est que provisoire (*Les femmes du quartier al-basâtîn* de Habib Selmi par exemple), le migrant se trouve là aussi étranger à son pays natal. A partir des romans cités ici, ma communication portera sur la notion du retour comme projet et comme un acte effectif du parcours du migrant arabe en Occident ou à l'intérieur même du monde arabe. Elle interrogera les causes et les conséquences du retour et le discours porté par le migrant sur cette notion.

4) **Shima Shahbazi** (University of Sydney), *Politics of representation in Ahdaf Soueif's historiographical memoir: The map of love*

Critiquing traditional historiography, postmodern historiography emphasises that mainstream/dominant narratives fail to report minorities/marginal voices and their critical perspective on the past. These marginal "ex-centric" voices produce micro-narratives which, according to Lyotard, accept difference and the transient nature of knowing and, foregrounding everyday life, they invite a multitude of alternative voices. These micro-narratives fill in the gaps created by dominant discourses which censor the minority while highlighting the majority. Since, according to Foucault, history is the complex interrelationship of a variety of discourses, a Postmodern/postcolonial historiography of such micro-narratives can shed light on how they challenge the dominant discourses, on the one hand, and how the voices of the minority are brought to the fore via them, on the other. Grounding on this theoretical background, this paper focuses on the novel *The Map of Love* (1999) by the Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif. Situating Ahdaf Soueif in the context of transnational literature, her novel is read as an example of historiographical micro-narrative which highlights the voices of marginal subjects or, as Spivak puts it, the "subaltern". It is argued that, bringing to light individual "feminine" memory, her narrative questions history as a grand-narrative defined by the discourses of power. An intersectional analysis which takes into consideration various factors such as gender, class, race and generation is proposed in this paper. Critiquing the mainstream discourses which affect the practice of representation, this paper proposes that Ahdaf Soueif's writing introduces a form of "decolonizing epistemology" to the intellectual sphere in the Orient. By foregrounding the micro-narratives of the minority, such "decolonizing epistemology" not only defies the dominant discourses of power but also backgrounds them.

5) **Roula Salam** (University of Alberta), *From "motherland" to "somewhere safer than the land"?: the Syrian refugee crisis as narrated in spatial representations between poetry and media*

The tragedy is not here
in the whip, the office, or in sirens
It is there

In the cradle. . .

In the womb

Surely I was not tied to the womb with an umbilical cord

It was a hangman's noose

(From a translation of Syrian poet Muhammad Al-Maghut's poem "Tattoo", 2011)

Was Aylan Kurdi's tragedy not in drowning but in being born? Today's narrative of the flight of mostly Syrian and Kurdish refugees seeking asylum in Europe or Canada seems indeed to have culminated in this image of Aylan's (or Alan's) cold lifeless body washed up on a Turkish beach. The (anti?)-climactic image seems to have led (too late) to an intense humanitarian awakening that took the world by storm. But with all the emotional accusations, the apologetic speeches, and the ongoing speculations and analyses, the toddler that initially riveted all this attention remains silent. In the midst of the political mayhem in Syria, it may well seem that art is ineffectual, irrelevant, or, at best, to be deferred to better times than these. But the time for art has never been more opportune: Cartoonists have scrambled to re-present Aylan, positioning his pathetic body on negotiating tables creaking under the weight of corruption or depicting him as a free angel or dove flying in heaven. Poets and writers such as Mohja Kahf, Ghada al-Atrash, Najat Abdul Samad, Ghias al-Jundi, Ibrahim al-Qashoush, and others have also voiced their horrified responses to the latest incidents pertaining to the crisis through poetry or interviews. There is a constant struggle to make sense of the tragedy and to find some outlet, even as the images of pain and tragedy keep coming in and remain curiously quiet. This study seeks to examine spatial metaphors and spatial representations of or related to the Syrian Refugee dilemma in both literature and across news media. Images of pain and death on the news appear to drown out silent narratives which may be more subtly articulated through spatial readings of primarily Syrian poetry that seek to define and articulate symbols and tropes of pain and hope. The study attempts to illustrate the refugee crisis through an analysis of both the media lenses that focus on graphic imagery of the revolution and the more subtle lenses of poetry that offer the language of spatial discourse as an alternative narrative that may give voice to the victims and perhaps even hope beyond the cacophonous sound bites in today's media.

6) **Ikram Masmoudi** (The University of Delaware), *Iraqi migration in fiction*

Over more than half a century, since the rise of the Baath Party up until the emergence of ISIS in Iraq almost all components of Iraqi society have been affected by displacement and migration. All constituents of Iraqi social fabric: Jews, Communists, Baathists, Kurdish, and, more recently Christians and Sunnis have had their own share and their own history of migration and fragmentation. These different experiences of displacement are narrated and well reflected in the Iraqi novel whether written by home bound authors or expatriate ones. First, under the Baath regime political, groups such as the Communists and Nationalists had to flee persecution and find refuge mostly in Europe. They were followed by more intellectuals who felt stifled by the grip of Baathism in the 1990's. Opposed to these waves of mostly intellectual and political migrations, and after the 2003 war and the occupation, the rise of sectarianism fueled the scales of migration leading to millions of Iraqis in neighboring Arab countries such as Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. The recent rise of ISIS and its spreading control internally displaced many Sunnis and accelerated the migration of the Christian minority. This paper will shed light through fiction on these major moments in the

history of migration affecting Iraqis and its cultural and political background characteristics. I will examine how fiction writers reflected the fragmentation of the Iraqi society by relying mostly on representative novels such as Inaam Kashashi's *Tashari*, Shakir Noori's *The Hell of the Monk*, Hayfa Zangan's *Women on a Journey* and Hadiyya Hussein's *Beyond Love* among others.

7) **Cristina Dozio** (University of Milan), ***Al-fā'il (The labourer) by Ḥamdī Abū Julayyil***

The Egyptian novelist Ḥamdī Abū Julayyil (born 1968) comes from a family of Beduin origins that settled in the Fayyūm region in the first half of the nineteenth century, after emigrating from Lybia. He himself experienced a migratory trajectory, when he moved to Cairo and worked as a labourer in the construction field, while pursuing his literary aspirations. These autobiographical references permeate his two novels, *Luṣūṣ mutaqa' idūn* (2002, English translation *Thieves in Retirement*) *Al-fā'il (The Labourer)*, 2008, English translation *A Dog With No Tail*). This paper will focus on the second of these novels, which offers a multi-layered and complex depiction of displacement from the countryside to the city in the contemporary Egyptian context. The main character actually moves between two distant worlds pertaining to the same country, and experiences a double alienation. In particular, I shall examine how the episodes about construction work activate the link between the migratory experience and the process of self-discovery. On the one hand, they provide a portrait of urban migrants' precarious living and working conditions; on the other hand, they are intertwined with the protagonist's attempt to shape his own identity and to give form to his literary ambitions. The quest for identity in *Al-fā'il* involves also a nostalgic look at the village of origin and a re-reading of the past at individual and collective levels. The narrator re-writes the story of his beduin tribe of origins, which is a story of migration and forced settlement, through the lense of irony. Humour will be identified a key stylistic feature in shaping this kind migration narrative.

8) **Sara Arami** (University of Strasbourg), ***The Negotiation of Identity in Laila Halaby's Once in a Promised Land and West of Jordan***

Born to a Jordanian father and an American mother in Beirut, Laila Halaby is a member of the new generation of Arab American women writers. This paper will focus on her *Once in a Promised Land* and *West of Jordan*, in order to demonstrate how Halaby uses fiction to question the well-accepted stereotypes of gender and nationality, making it her mission to challenge the ossified image of the sexed and racialized female body. She not only contests the role of women's body in representing the national culture, but also questions the occidental view of that body, a view that fixes Middle Eastern women in the position of a passive victim of traditional oriental patriarchy and religious practices. By doing so, she replies to the growing need (especially after 9/11) for a redefinition of Arab American women's subjectivities from their own discursive positions, and a representation of the complexities of identity and belonging they entail as a way of soliciting understanding and a "place" for their nonconformist presences.