

14<sup>th</sup> SeSaMO Conference

**PATHS OF RESISTANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

University of Turin (Italy)

31 January–2 February 2019



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITLE: Challenging Narratives of Oppression: Middle Eastern Studies and the Politics of Research**

**CONVENOR(S):** Lorenzo Casini, University of Messina

**ABSTRACT:**

The counter-revolutionary wave that has recently swept through the Middle East has found legitimation in Europe and the US in a “discursive order” (Fairclough 1989, 1995) in which the claims of the Arab revolutions have been disqualified as naïve utopias, while systematic human rights violations by Arab regimes have been minimized or justified. Within this emerging discursive order, old orientalist ideas long discarded by the academic community (e.g. the incompatibility between Islam and democracy; Arab exceptionalism and so on) have turned into incontestable assumptions on which narratives of imminent threats coming from the region (e.g. “terrorism”, “migration”) have been articulated. Besides legitimizing the Arab counter-revolutions, mainstream discourses on the Middle East have served also to ground dominant discursive and social orders in the West where a new nationalist rhetoric is rapidly catching on in several countries.

Drawing on ongoing debates within the Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies (SeSaMO) on the role of scholars of the Middle East in the present political scenario, this panel explores the potential of research as a means of resistance and transformation. **Within this wide framework, the panel invites contributions that address the following themes:**

- **The political implications of epistemological paradigms employed in Middle Eastern Studies**
- **Critical analyses of hegemonic discourses on the Middle East**
- **Research freedom in Middle Eastern Studies in the Middle East and abroad**

**CONVENOR'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:**

**Lorenzo Casini** is Assistant Professor of Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Messina. Most of his research concerns the study of the Arabic novel through theoretical approaches drawn from debates in “cultural studies” and the “sociology of literature”. Currently he is preparing a monograph in English language on the poetical and political deployments of the European theme in the Egyptian novel and working on a new project on recent developments in Gulf literature.

**PAPERS:**

## **1. Modern Arabic Literature explained to Antonio Gramsci**

**Lorenzo Casini**

### **ABSTRACT:**

Intellectual freedom, in the *Prison Notebooks*, is not conceived as a given condition. Gramsci imagines it as a process whereby each individual confronts the cultural sediments left on him by overlapping cultural traditions, hegemonic discourses and so on in the attempt to build a coherent world view. The present paper explores Modern Arabic Literature as a privileged field of study in the present political scenario to exercise intellectual freedom. The paper will focus on the immeasurable resources offered by MAL to undo the cultural legacy sedimented in the “senso commune”, challenge hegemonic ideas of world order and articulate emancipatory and universalist counter-discourses.

### **PROFILO ACCADEMICO DELLA PROPONENTE:**

**Lorenzo Casini** teaches Arabic Language and Literature at the Univeristy of Messina.

## **2. Fare letteratura, fare ricerca, produrre dissidenza**

### **ABSTRACT:**

Che senso ha occuparsi di letteratura oggi? Che riflessioni incoraggia la narrativa araba contemporanea? Qual è l’impatto della ricerca sul contesto in cui viviamo quotidianamente? Come colmare la distanza tra il contesto in cui si vive e il contesto su cui si fa ricerca?

Partendo da quelli che sono i miei due principali progetti di ricerca, il primo sulle rappresentazioni del corpo in una selezione di romanzi di scrittrici siriane e il progetto in corso sul soggetto migrante nella narrativa araba contemporanea, il mio intento sarà quello di formulare, nella cornice di questo panel, alcune riflessioni intorno a questi quesiti.

L’Italia – e più in generale l’Europa – sta attraversando un’epoca segnata dalla chiusura, dall’imposizione di frontiere sempre meno porose, dalla paura nei confronti del diverso, dal rifiuto di qualsiasi politica dell’accoglienza e da un terrore generalizzato per il cambiamento. Questi fenomeni sono accompagnati dal diffondersi di un atteggiamento di svalutazione e addirittura disprezzo nei confronti della cultura e del lavoro intellettuale.

In questo contesto fare ricerca diventa un atto di resistenza e risulta significativo rivendicare il ruolo performativo della letteratura – e più in generale del linguaggio – nell’attivare il cambiamento, suggerendo narrazioni alternative a quelle dei discorsi di potere dominanti.

Muovendo da questi presupposti cercherò di enucleare alcuni dei paradigmi epistemologici che la letteratura di cui mi occupo contribuisce a decostruire, proponendo modelli alternativi a quelli dei discorsi egemonici. Nello specifico cercherò di portare l’attenzione su come, in alcuni esempi di romanzi arabi contemporanei la centralità del corpo da un lato e le rappresentazioni di soggetti migranti contribuiscano a fondare una relazione “incarnata” tra l’individuo e la collettività. Mentre in Italia assistiamo ad un modo sempre più “disincarnato” di fare politica, in cui la partecipazione dell’individuo alla vita comunitaria è quasi esclusivamente virtuale, il romanzo arabo propone modelli alternativi di impegno politico in cui si mantiene un nesso corporeo tra l’individuo e la società.

## **ACADEMIC PROFILE:**

Martina Censi è ricercatrice a tempo determinato all'Università degli Studi di Bergamo. Nelle sue ricerche analizza diversi aspetti relativi alla narrativa di Siria e Libano con un focus sulle rappresentazioni letterarie del corpo. Attualmente si occupa di rappresentazioni del soggetto migrante nel romanzo arabo moderno e contemporaneo.

### **3. Middle Eastern Studies & Hegemonic Discourses ; The Dream of Disrupting from the Center**

**Dina Hadad**

#### **ABSTRACT**

The historical transformations that have taken place across the Middle East provide a valuable insight into the complex nature and development of an area study that struggles to disrupt from the center. This is so specifically with regard to upholding rule of law in times of crisis and transitions as they are ongoing overall the region.

In particular, the region is transfixed by recurring themes of conflict and security, which remain embedded within the historical legacy of colonization and independence. The intense history of colonialism after the failure of an Arab national project followed by the international tolerance of the Palestine tragedy in the occupied territories and the constant condemnation of any resistant movement in the region.

The consequential reality of the region today offers ironically no change in the existing themes and discourse and thus begs the reconsideration of epistemological trends. The wave of revolutions and counter revolutions since 2011 recreated a conflict and hostility and produced less ability to predict or read the reality of the area with a conducive effort to find solutions. All of these multifaceted threads became historically entrenched within a fragile landscape dominated by a security discourse while still struggling with economic and human development.

This paper, while informed theoretically by the standing point of, aims at exploring post revolutions approaches to Middle Eastern studies and whether the traditional 'problematics' that have defined the discipline are adequate to explain the contemporary dominant discursive and social orders. This exploration will attempt to identify a number of reading/ methods and provide post revolution critiques

## **ACADEMIC PROFILE:**

**Dina Hadad**

Assistant Professor – Kuwait International Law School

Key words: Epistemology      Critical Research      Development      Exception      Norm

#### 4. Farsi or Persian?: a name as a form of resistance

Soraya Mehrabi

##### ABSTRACT:

What lies behind a name? It will seem banal, but the choice of a word is not as casual as would seem. Indeed, our choice will bring cultural and political consequences which are often overlooked. This is particularly important if we consider the power of a word within the academic world. This is evident in the study led by Kamran Talattof (2015) where he finds that the use of the term *Farsi* instead of *Persian* in English is not only incorrect, but it will also imply some cultural consequences. We could see in the persistent use of the term *Farsi* a form of nationalist rhetoric in which institutions and scholars try to distance themselves from the possible reference to a past which they want to sink into oblivion. Following the example of Talattof, we will show how the academic works are sometimes politicised, trying to show how forms of resistance could also be found within academic works.

##### PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA PROPONENTE:

**Soraya Mehrabi** ha conseguito la laurea magistrale in Lingue Moderne presso l'Università degli Studi di Messina, discutendo una tesi sull'identità delle comunità iraniane residenti in America da un punto di vista sociolinguistico. I suoi interessi di ricerca spaziano dagli aspetti linguistici ai fenomeni di costruzione identitaria delle comunità migranti.

#### 5. L'islam, la distruzione creativa del Medio Oriente e il "patrimonio dell'umanità"

Samuela Pagani

##### ABSTRACT:

Il mio intervento propone una riflessione sulla mia esperienza di ricerca e di insegnamento negli ultimi anni. Per chi lavora oggi all'università, l'esigenza di elaborare e rendere accessibile un sapere critico che risponda alle sfide del presente è ostacolata da molti fattori, legati da un lato alla mutazione aziendalista dell'università, e dall'altro alla sempre maggiore divaricazione fra la vocazione critica delle scienze umane e la semplificazione retorica del discorso pubblico. Un esempio di questa divaricazione è l'informazione selettiva e propagandistica sulla distruzione del patrimonio culturale nel Vicino Oriente. Questo tema è stato al centro di un recente tentativo, da parte dei docenti della mia università, di creare un laboratorio interdisciplinare che affronti la nozione di "patrimonio" nei suoi aspetti storici, politici, economici e legali, allargando la prospettiva al di fuori degli studi di area. Questa iniziativa dal basso cerca di rispondere, con tutta la sua modestia, alla marginalizzazione delle nostre discipline nell'università italiana. Nel quadro degli incontri di SESAMO, può essere utile mettere a confronto i diversi modi in cui ciascuno di noi cerca di "resistere" al sentimento di irrilevanza e inutilità, che si avverte in particolare negli atenei in cui i docenti di arabo e storia dei Paesi islamici sono gli unici rappresentanti della nostra area.

##### PROFILO ACCADEMICO DELLA PROPONENTE:

**Samuela Pagani** insegna Lingua e letteratura araba presso l'Università del Salento.

## 6. "The politics of literature" in practice: *Bildungsnarratives* in the Egyptian Context

Maria Elena Paniconi

### ABSTRACT:

According to Rancière (2011), literary texts are *per se* political writings. There is a connection between politics as a form of collective practice and literature as a historically, ideologically, culturally determined form of expression. Literature intervenes in shaping the arena of the political: a case in point of this mutual influence between the literary and the political is the "canonical novel" in Egypt, whose rise and "development" has been determined by a political project (Selim 2004). This very idea of "canonical novel" has been then redefined and recovered in the dominant narrative of literary criticism during the era of Nasser (Colla 2009).

This paper aims at presenting and discussing some theoretical issues arisen from my reading of a literary corpus that includes some canonical and contemporary Egyptian *Bildungsnarratives*. Among these issues:

- Is there any possibility to apply the "western" category of *Bildung* to an Arab context?
- Given that *Bildung* assumed an explicitly normative and conservative function (Boes 2006) in the European context, how to study this *genre*, in terms of function and form, in a modern and modernist non-European context?
- How has the becoming of modern subject been narrated in the Egyptian context, in parallel and/or beyond the national paradigm?

### PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA PROPONENTE:

**Maria Elena Paniconi** è ricercatrice in Lingua e Letteratura araba presso l'Università di Macerata. Si occupa di romanzo arabo moderno e contemporaneo, di scritture di donne nel mondo arabo sin dal primo Novecento, di narrativa araba in generale (moderna e contemporanea) e di traduzione letteraria.

Ha scritto con Lorenzo Casini e Lucia Sorbera *Modernità Arabe. Nazione, narrazione e nuovi soggetti nel romanzo egiziano*, (Mesogea, Messina 2013) sviluppando uno studio sul tema del giovane in formazione nel primo Novecento egiziano. Nel 2017 ha pubblicato *Adib. Storia di un letterato*, una traduzione del romanzo del 1935 di Tàhà Husayn preceduta da un saggio critico (Edizioni Ca' Foscari). Ha curato per la terza edizione dell'Enciclopedia dell'Islam la voce "Tàhà Husayn" e si sta attualmente occupando di quella dedicata a "Muhammad Husayn Haykal".

## 7. The Hegemony of Dichotomies in Scholarship on Turkey

Taraneh Wilkinson

### ABSTRACT:

Literature on religion in Turkey is closely bound up with political discourse. From Turkish philosophy to international scholarship on Turkish politics, the temptation has been to frame Turkish Islamic identity in stark dichotomies, such as modern vs. traditional or religious vs. secular. While this either-or discourse on Turkish Islamic identity has been challenged, it is still common to oversimplify and polarize when discussing Turkish Islam, with the effect of reducing and instrumentalizing lived Turkish Islamic identities to serve relatively predictable academic discourses.

This paper offers a critical analysis and alternative to polarizing discourse on religion in Turkey. I argue that this tendency towards dichotomy functions as an unhelpful hegemonic discourse and draw on Turkish *ilahiyat* faculties as a source of test cases and counter-examples to such polarizing explanatory frameworks. Turkish *ilahiyat* faculties are both Muslim confessional spaces and institutions devoted to the academic and scientific study of religion. While the discourse of dichotomies on Turkish Islamic identity can be found even in such faculties, the output of Turkish Muslim “theologians” cannot be reduced to simple dichotomies.

#### **PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA PROPONENTE:**

**Taraneh Wilkinson** is an International Postdoctoral Research Fellow at The John XXIII Foundation for Religious Studies in Bologna. She completed her Ph.D. at Georgetown University on the subject of contemporary Turkish Muslim thought. She is also author of *Dialectical Encounters: Contemporary Turkish Muslim Thought in Dialogue* (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).

### **8. An Intersectional Analysis of Women, Arts and Cinema in Post 2011**

#### **Egyptian Revolution**

**Radamis Zaky**

#### **ABSTRACT:**

In January 2011, Egyptian women and men went out to the streets to protest against Mubarak’s autocratic regime that lasted for three decades. Despite the fact that gender was not the cause or even the motivation for the outbreak of the mass protests, female protesters were protesting against an oppressive social and political power and not against the president only. Female artists/ writers/ filmmakers produced a tremendous amount of visual art and literary work to depict this moment and to celebrate female participation in the uprising. In this paper, I argue that women were able to constitute a new identity through developing a new type of representation through various forms of art. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze various artistic representations of female identity in post 2011 revolutionary Egypt. However, western academia always analyzes Arab women through the lens of three hegemonic discourse: the *Orientalist discourse*, the *Islamist discourse*, and the *State-Feminism discourse*. Thus, this presentation offers a critique to the application of these hegemonic discourses and presenting an intersectional analytical paradigm that will allow an effective analysis to the complex and paradoxical women’s experiences in post Arab Spring.

#### **ACADEMIC PROFILE:**

**Radamis Zaky**, Ph.D. Candidate

Zaky is currently conducting his PH.D. at the Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies, University of Ottawa, Canada. His research interests are mainly focusing on issues of Arab and Muslim women. His research interests also include cinema, immigration, and aging. He is also a filmmaker. His films focus on various issues related to social justice.