

14th 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: Post-1967 gender roles and resistance to authoritarianism in contemporary Syrian literature

CONVENOR(S): Dr Alessandro Columbu

ABSTRACT:

Although it has certainly gained greater relevance in European academia since the 2011 uprising and consequent conflict, Syria's vibrant literary field remains to this day a relatively understudied subject in European academia. In particular, the patterns of resistance that the connivance between authoritarianism and patriarchy has generated in novelists and short-story writers from Syria represents a largely uncharted alley of investigation. This panel invites contributions that explore how the persistence of patriarchal authoritarianism has reshaped the political dimension of Syrian literature since the late 1970s, particularly with regard to the relationship between politics, gender roles and sexualities, as illustrated for example by Samira Aghacy in her pivotal 2009 study. Aghacy and others indeed pinpoint the 1967 disastrous defeat to Israel as the crucial watershed after which fiction and cultural production in Syria and other countries of the region would never be the same again. Indeed numerous novels, plays and short stories published since the 1970s have brought to the stage a more openly subversive fashion of addressing this interstice and its effects on the individual, sexuality and the body through original roles assigned to male and female protagonists. Motivating this panel is the desire to clarify the changing nature of resistant cultural production in Syria and the political connotations that Syrian literature has assumed in the post-1967 period. The panel welcomes contributions that employ a multidisciplinary approach to challenge/confirm this argument of the *naksa* war of 1967 as the fundamental event that transformed modern Arabic literature irreversibly.

CONVENOR'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Dr **Alessandro Columbu** completed his PhD in modern Arabic literature at Edinburgh in 2017, and is currently an Arabic language tutor at the University of Manchester. Originally from Sardinia, his translation of Zakaria Tamer's *Taksir Rukab*, published in 2015, was the first book to have ever been translated from Arabic into Sardinian.

PAPERS:

1. The Politics of the Female Body in the Contemporary Fiction of Syrian Women

Linda Istanbulli

ABSTRACT:

As a historical practice, the nation is constructed through normative masculinities and femininities that constitute their roles within and relationships to the nation. Further, nationalisms, critics argue, are necessarily implicated in gendered binaries. The complex relationship between gender, nation, and the novel in the Arab world has not escaped the attention of literary critics. Many studies have demonstrated how the Arabic novel, which actively contributed to shaping national imaginaries, has often burdened women with excessive symbolization by constructing them and their bodies as signs and symbols of the nation. My paper, "The Politics of the Female Body in the Contemporary Fiction of Syrian Women," traces the ways in which contemporary Syrian women novelists work against this predominant discourse. Focusing on *Brōvā* by Rosa Yassin Ḥasan, I demonstrate how Ḥasan exposes the gendered dynamics of power in place and uses the masculine-feminine binary duality that had governed the imagining of the nation, only to subvert it from within. Agency, desire, and femininity are intertwined in *Brōvā* in such a way that new articulations of the female body, sexuality and subjectivity are made possible. These features, I argue, situate the works of contemporary Syrian women novelists within a newly emerging feminist sensibility in the Arab world, one that seeks to transform the prevalent gender politics rooted in nationalist discourses, and redefine the practice of citizenship and national belonging beyond gender hierarchies.

ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Linda Istanbulli is a PhD candidate at the Department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research focuses on the contemporary Syrian novel.

2. Love's failures and the betrayal of political hope: Resistance in Maram al-Massri's poetry

Lisa Marchi

ABSTRACT:

The proposed paper analyses the intersection between gender roles, sexuality, and politics in the collection *A Red Cherry on a White-tiled Floor* (Karzatun Hamraa ala Balatin Abyad) (2004) by Syrian-French poet Maram al-Massri. I argue that the volume reads like an archive of broken intimacies, in which love is never romanticised nor idealised but foregrounded with all its contradictions, limits, and failures. Unhappy love, in particular, and the impossibility for love to last are used by the poet as occasions to critically intervene in and resist dominant notions of eternal love and family loyalty. Al-Massri's poetry, I suggest, spoils the performance of deference and loyalty expected not only from the faithful wife but also from the submissive citizen, thus damaging the *cordon sanitaire* safely separating the private from the public domain. In line with other post-1967 Arab writers, the poet contributes to shed light on the silent complicity between patriarchy and authoritarianism, while also showing how affects such as shame, loyalty, and fear perpetuate conditions of (affective) inequality.

In my reading of Al-Massri's poetry, I am guided by theoretical works on affects and intimacy by queer theorists Sara Ahmed (2012) and Judith/Jack Halberstam (2011) as well as by critical works on love and sexuality in Arabic literature by, among others, Roger Allen (1995) and Samira Aghacy (2009).

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA PROPONENTE:

Lisa Marchi is currently adjunct professor at the University of Trento. She has conducted periods of research abroad at the Department of Near Eastern Studies (UCLA) and the Institute for Islamic Studies (McGill U). Her research interests include contemporary Arab multilingual literature, diaspora studies, philosophy, gender and sexuality studies, political theory.

3. *The evolution of committed literature in Syria*

Beatrice Morlacchi

ABSTRACT:

Committed literature developed in the Arab world after the translation of Sartre's essay "*Qu'est-ce que la littérature*" (Sartre 1947) by the Egyptian writer Ṭaha Ḥussayn. This kind of literature succeed in Syria because the development of the novel occurred together with the national foundation, and, Syrian writer felt his engagement in leading the new society to improve. His engagement based on the new ideologies and a social message. It was right then that the literary genre of socialist realism grew up.

The pivotal event that caused a radical change in history, politics, as well as in literature is the *naksah* (1967). The role of intellectual felt into crisis, as well as his *iltizām*. Writers began dissociating themselves from the political ideologies that caused the crisis and started exploring the personal perception of the reality. This literary change contributed to the development of the expressionist realism genre. Although the intellectuals' loss of sureness in their capacity of changing the reality, they remained devoted to their mission of increasing awareness among Syrian people through the denunciation of political repression, censorship and torture. The Lebanese writer Iliyās Ḥūrī has called this new commitment "*beyond iltizām*" (Ḥūrī 2015).

Furthermore, the Syrian war has led writers to review their commitment and we may say today that the current engaged Syrian literature presents some new features, such as the free denunciation of historical events, which it was forbidden to speak about (i.e. the Hama massacre), and the focus on human being, on his feelings and body.

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA PROPONENTE:

Beatrice Morlacchi, graduated in Languages and Cultures at the University of Milan, has focused her researches on current opposition Syrian literature and committed Syrian literature, on which she has written a paper in Arabic that will be published on the review of the French Institut of Near East in Beirut.

4. Resistance to patriarchy in Samar Yazbek's works.

Giulia Spadoni

ABSTRACT:

The contemporary Syrian literature is fulfilled of women writers who speaks about genre subjugation to patriarchy in novels. Samar Yazbek is a great example of the new Syrian generation of writers that openly faces the taboos of the contemporary Syrian society. For instance, in her novel *Rā'iḥat al-qurfat* (Cinnamon, 2007) she defies the patriarchal authoritarianism inside the society. Through the tale of a secret female homosexual relationship between two women from different social classes, lies a huge provocation to the Arab patriarchy and to the authoritarian Syrian government.

In same way the 1967 defeat gave life to a new era of Syrian literature, the 2011 uprising represents a new turning point in contemporary Syrian literature. The revolution was a new watershed that modified the target of Samar Yazbek's writing: the attack to al-Asad government is taken by reporting the reality of the violent repression against the protesters. Samar Yazbek reported almost daily the first four months of the revolution in a diary she published after fleeing Syria. The diary, *Taqāṭu' nīrān* (A woman in the Crossfire, 2012), is a witness of resistance through an unveiled renewed attack to the regime violent repression and censure.

The aim of this paper is to show how has changed the writer's necessity of facing the authoritarian patriarchy government in Syria before and after the 2011 revolution.

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA PROPONENTE:

Holding a MA in Mediterranean Studies at the University "L'Orientale" (Naples), I am currently a PhD student in Contemporary Arabic Literature at Granada University (Spain), with a project in Contemporary Syrian Literature about the writer Samar Yazbek.