

*Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*

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Wail Hassan's *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* constitutes a significant contribution to the intersecting fields of ethnic American and postcolonial studies, as it seeks to recover more than a century-long tradition of Arab American literature that "had simply fallen between the disciplinary cracks" (xi). Hassan does not claim, however, to propose a systematic literary history of Anglophone Arab writing, but rather, to highlight the ways in which the immigrant experience has markedly shaped its generic configurations, cultural presuppositions, ideological (dis)engagements, and discursive strategies.

While distinguishing between Arab American and Arab British immigrant authors, and between U.S.- and British-born Arab authors, Hassan focuses his study on the former group and argues that its authors usually position themselves as translators of Arabic culture to their American and British readers. Their translational poetics, however, are ineluctably refracted through the dual prisms of Orientalism and the history of European imperialism (xii). Drawing upon but also departing from Lawrence Venuti's "'ethics of difference' in translation," Hassan proffers the concept of "translational literature" to designate texts that resist Orientalist discourse by enacting "cultural translation in the 'original' itself" (31, 33). In other words, the translational text is that which simultaneously stages "the process of translation and foregrounds the limits of translatability" (49). By infusing the target text with linguistic and cultural idioms characteristic only of the source text, it creates for the target audience an untranslatable foreignness that calls into question that audience's Orientalist assumptions. Anglophone Arab writing is therefore translational insofar as it performs this ethics of radical difference by way of undermining "the myth of autonomous cultural and civilizational identities" (35).

While closely reading a number of representative authors in terms of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of minor literature, Hassan insists that unless supplemented by a "postcolonial and translational" framework, such theory cannot adequately account for these authors' minoritarian experiences (xii-iii). According to Deleuze and Guattari, a minor literature is one that exhibits three major characteristics: the deterritorialization of the major language in which it is written, the political nature of its subject matter, and the collectivistic orientation of its enunciative moments (16-17). For

Hassan, such categorization does not always apply to the texts he examines. Early twentieth-century Arab immigrant writing, for example, may be said to embody a minoritarian consciousness within the frame of a major language (e.g. English), but close scrutiny of such writing reveals that the political and the collective, the other two hallmarks of minor literature, are either entirely absent or only rudimentarily present. As one moves closer in time to the present moment, however, one clearly notices that the translational project of Arab American and Arab British authors tends to be more politicized than that of their early twentieth-century counterparts. Such political investment should, in fact, come as no surprise, especially given the ongoing history of major political *contretemps* between Europe, Israel, and the U.S., on the one hand, and the Arab Muslim world, on the other: the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, which continues to be viewed by Arabs as a colossal betrayal of their aspirations by Europe (mainly France and Britain); the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the first subsequent Arab-Israeli war that same year (referred to as the *Nakba* or catastrophe), a disaster resulting in the displacement of massive Palestinian populations; the second Arab-Israeli war in 1967 (referred to as *Naksa* or setback), a fatal blow to the Palestinian cause in particular and to Arab pride in general; the two Gulf Wars (1991 and 2003); and, more recently, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, events that further exacerbated anti-Arab racism, Islamophobia, and Orientalist stereotypes in the West.

The first two chapters of Hassan's book introduce us to two prominent Arab "*Nahda* [Renaissance] intellectuals" usually identified as pioneers of Arab American literature: Ameen Rihani and Khalil Gibran. Their translational narratives, Hassan contends, often position the sentimental East, not as the opposite of, but rather as the complementing dimension of, the rational West. And the bridging of both East and West, they both surmise, would ultimately create what they considered an ideal human civilization. While Rihani, author of the first Arab American novel in English (*The Book of Khalid*, published in 1911) and thus known as the father of Arab American literature, was an Oriental who sought to challenge the West's Orientalist assumptions, Gibran embraced, not inconveniently, the role constructed for him by Orientalist discourse. "The Gibran phenomenon," as Hassan calls it, has therefore more to do with Gibran's self-fashioning as an exotic Oriental sage than with the inherent aesthetic merit of his work (61-2). Moreover, Gibran's cultural translation was ultimately steeped in metaphysical abstraction and esoteric cogitations that were divorced from the concrete social conditions of Arab societies, and this at a time when the European imperial powers were re-drawing the entire map of the Arab world.

While comfortably operating within the frame of American Orientalism (wherein the East is constructed through the "dual framework" of Biblical mythology and *Arabian-Nights* exoticism), early Arab American autobiographies, the focus of Chapters Three and Four, were often promoted as "success stories" that confirmed the myth of the American Dream and its attainability by all (79). With the

passage of the 1924 immigration law, which disrupted the influx of Middle-Eastern immigrants into the U.S., and throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century, Arab American autobiography became less invested in “the project of cultural translation” than in establishing the autobiographer’s *American* identity (100).

It was not until the 1970s, however, that Arab American autobiography in English began to bear more clearly the mark of a minor literature. Its political and collectivistic impulse is perhaps no more apparent than in the Palestinian exilic memoir, examples of which are explored in Chapter Five. In Edward Said’s *Out of Place* (1999), for instance, the individual inner struggles of young Edward are oftentimes coterminous with “the struggle for Palestinian national self-determination,” particularly in the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war (120). A more harrowing story of homelessness and exile than Said’s is also told in Fawaz Turki’s three memoirs: *The Disinherited: Journal of a Palestinian Exile* (1972); *Soul in Exile: Lives of a Palestinian Revolutionary* (1988); and *Exile’s Return: The Making of a Palestinian American* (1994). Unlike Said’s conclusive memoir, which chronicles his life up to the 1960s, Turki’s (especially the last two) are open-ended narratives in which the ongoing personal struggle of the Palestinian exile is insignificant unless read allegorically as being representative of the entire nation (123-4).

In Chapter Six, Hassan examines the memoirs of two Egyptian-American academics renowned more as scholars and critical thinkers than fiction writers: Ihab Habib Hassan’s *Out of Egypt: Scenes and Arguments of an Autobiography* (1986) and Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage* (1999). While Ihab Hassan, like Abraham Rihbany and Salom Rizk, draws on an Orientalist tradition in which Egypt is “suspended in mythical time,” Ahmed “takes a radically different stance” by situating her life in Egypt within the context of contemporary political history (145, 146). Ahmed’s memoir therefore “belongs to the new direction in Arab American immigrant writing,” one that not only challenges Orientalist assumptions but also assimilates the identity of the autobiographical subject within the context of history (149).

In the next two chapters, Hassan directs his attention to Arab British immigrant literature and identifies Egyptian-born British-educated Ahdaf Soueif and Sudanese-Scottish Leila Aboulela as its quintessential figures, for their works, unlike those of early-twentieth-century Arab-American authors, exemplify “all three characteristics of minor literature identified by Deleuze and Guattari” and bring into focus the legacies of European imperialism in postcolonial Arab societies (160). Soueif’s *The Map of Love* is, in Hassan’s estimation, “a paradigmatic text [of] ‘translational literature’” precisely because it undermines the English reader’s exoticist and domesticating impulse by “staging unreadability, multilingualism, and translation as themes, plot devices, stylistic features, and discursive strategies” (160, 170). Aboulela’s fiction is less interested in challenging Europe’s colonialist ideology than in “attempting an epistemological break with it” (182). While drawing inspiration mainly from the Islamic religion, unlike “modern Arabic literature, which has been predominantly secular,”

Aboulela's Muslim fiction remains divorced from both history and politics and overly reliant on a fundamentalist "fiction of authenticity" wherein the West is defined primarily by its opposition to Islam (180,198).

If Aboulela's Muslim fiction represents "a minor literature within a minor literature," so does Arab American queer fiction, its other "unlikely bedfellow" and the subject of Hassan's last chapter (180, 199). Joining the chorus of other Arab American and Arab British authors in critiquing Orientalist, Eurocentric anti-Arab racism, Ramzi Salti's and Rabih Alameddine's novels treat issues of homophobia and sexual identity both in the U.S. and in the Arab world.

That Hassan devotes seven chapters in total to Arab American immigrant literature and only two to its Arab British counterpart may be deemed an imbalance in the structure of his study, but one may also argue that the larger corpus and longer history of the former literature may have warranted, in Hassan's eyes at least, such an extensive coverage. Be that as it may, Hassan's study would have been more remarkably comprehensive (and perhaps more balanced) had it also included such thriving Arab-British authors as Jamal Mahjoub and Hisham Matar whose work is currently receiving increasing academic attention. This, however, should not take away from the unavoidably significant influence this gem of a book will have on future studies of Anglophone Arab writing. Distinguished by the lucid elegance of its style, the breadth of its scope, and the perspicuity of its arguments, Hassan's *Imaginative Narratives* will deservedly become an indispensable source for academics and researchers interested in the Arab novel in English. Already author of *Tayib Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction* (2003), the first and only manuscript in English devoted to the entire fictional oeuvre of the Arab world's most celebrated author; co-editor of *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Naguib Mahfouz* (2012); and translator of Abdelfattah Kilito's *Thou Shall Not Speak My Language* (2008), Hassan has undoubtedly consecrated his place as one of the prominent scholars and critics in the fields of postcolonial studies, translation theory, comparative literature, and Arab diaspora studies. In this recent book of his, not only does he offer us a much-needed critical overview of an emerging body of diasporic literature (Arab American and Arab British), but he also helps us understand the ways in which Euro-American Orientalism shapes the translational politics and poetics of such literature. Given the social and political exigencies of the Arab world today, particularly in the context of the events of 11 September 2001 and the recent Arab uprisings, one cannot emphasize enough the timeliness of studies like Hassan's.

#### Works Cited

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan and Réda Bensmaïa. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986. Print.

