

Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in the Diaspora

Syrine Hout

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At one point in Syrine Hout's rich analytical work on post-war Anglophone Lebanese literature, she references Elias Khoury on the nature of memory and civil war. Khoury writes, "civil wars can be erased from neither reality nor memory. Instead, they are reborn or reincarnated...if erased from memory, they colonize the subconscious" (151). In many ways, this passage seems to encompass much of what Hout argues in this work—namely that despite the years that have elapsed since the Civil War was officially declared to have ended, Lebanese writers in the diaspora have continued to meditate on the meaning of this event and its profound reshaping of their lives in far-flung locations. Put another way, the very fact of its repression or "erasure" in Lebanese society, Hout reminds us, compels artists to construct literary "testimonies" to attest to their experiences of the violence and trauma of the war (202). There is no moving on, at least not yet, for this generation of writers.

Hout's work is strong in many regards, though it is terrain that has been covered extensively in other works related to Lebanese literature and Arab writing in the diaspora—notably those of Elise Salem, Miriam Cooke, Evelyn Accad, Steven Salatia, and Wail Hassan. Hout distinguishes her project by, on the one hand, grounding her study in an attempt to define a new literary formation—that of post-war Lebanese Anglophone literature—and, on the other hand, examining how these novels negotiate Lebanese identity, feelings of exile, and notions of home. While Hout notes that part of the impulse for this study is the desire to explore a "new generation of fresh voices from a post-war perspective" (xi), it is clear that she also wants to broaden or globalize the frame from which we have traditionally looked at diasporic literature and, for that matter, Lebanese literature. Pushing back against earlier studies of "ethnic literature" that emphasized hyphenated identity in specifically American, Canadian, Australian, or British contexts, Hout argues for a reframing of this category to think about how distinctively Lebanese voices are writing in English from many global locations in an effort to look afresh at Lebanese history and their relationship to their homeland (8). These writers (like their Francophone counterparts) have, she cogently argues, debunked two myths: first, "the myth of return to a golden age of a romanticized Lebanon;" and secondly, "the slavish imitation of Western lifestyle" (8). To underscore this idea, Hout suggests that "nothing is holy" for this generation (all of these writers were born between the 1950s and the 1970s), and therefore they are comfortable with fluid identities, privileging neither the Lebanon of the past and the old guard nor the

culture of their new adopted homes. While all of their literature is clearly “nostographic” or writing about return in various guises (14), it a body of work that remains typified by a “cultural hybridity” and “state of in-betweenness” (9).

Instead of using the adopted or host country as the primary cultural and geographic reference point, Hout’s work is predicated on the idea that all of these works are better understood as Lebanese literature written in English negotiating questions of liminality and ideas of “home.” This particular view highlights the extent to which Lebanon is, in addition to Arabic and French, easily still very much an “English informed cultural landscape” (5-6). Furthermore, she notes that the decision to write in English for some of these writers is also related to wanting to reach a different target audience, and, on some practical level, the reality of the market and the fact that exposure to an English-speaking market can alter (and in some cases) broaden an author’s audience. Again Hout’s agenda here is evident in that she wants to emphasize the international quality of Lebanese literature (whether written in Arabic, French or English) from a location within or outside Lebanon. As part of the corpus of world literature, and echoing the work of Ottmar Ette, Hout notes that Lebanese literature, like other world literatures, is characterized by “migration and movement”; it is transcultural and has “no fixed abode” (7).

The book is divided into six chapters, including an Introduction and brief Afterword. Hout focuses on eleven novels in total: four by Rabih Alameddine (*Koolaidis*, *The Perv*, *I, the Divine*, and *The Hakawati*); one by Tony Hanania (*The Unreal City*); two by Nada Awar Jarrar (*Somewhere*, *Home* and *A Good Land*); one by Patricia Sarrafian Ward (*The Bullet Collection*); one by Nathalie Abi Ezzi (*A Girl Made of Dust*); and two by Rawi Hage (*DeNiro’s Game* and *Cockroach*). The novels are paired not by author or geographic location, but by loose thematic groupings related to the book’s organization: Part I “Homesickness and Sickness of Home,” Part II “Trauma Narratives and The Scars of War,” Part III “Playing with Fire at Home and Abroad,” and Part IV “Exile versus Repatriation.”

One of the strengths and, ironically, the weaknesses of this work is Hout’s exhaustive use of secondary material. She shows an impressive command over the scholarly literature in the field and amply makes use of it throughout her work. Her ability to borrow from such a wide array of scholars (drawing from scholarship on Arabic literature, cultural theory, Arab American literary criticism and works on Lebanon’s cultural and urban history) to show how themes in these works are reflected in the novels is often exhilarating and makes for a dense reading experience. Her analysis, in particular, of the work of the Lebanese American author Rabih Alameddine’s *Koolaidis* and the Lebanese Canadian Rawi Hage’s two novels is strong and wonderfully fresh. At times, however, I missed hearing more of her own voice; instead she constantly navigates between her own analysis of these works and the writings of others on subjects as wide-ranging as exilic existence and homeland, militarization, nostalgia, PTSD, poverty, drugs, AIDS, and repatriation. Her study would be more effective with

a narrower focus—perhaps using fewer novels and covering fewer themes—and her own position is not always clear. While the consideration of these works together in a single volume and her attempt to define a Lebanese Anglophone post-war literary formation is original, reading her Afterword I was left wondering if the sprawling and diverse nature of these works prevented her from drawing meaningful conclusions. A lengthier Afterword that moved beyond questions of exile and home and offered more thoughts on this younger generation of Lebanese writers, the role of English in Lebanon's rapidly changing cultural terrain, and the reception of this writing in Lebanon would have made the final section of this work more compelling.

Overall, I strongly agree with Hout's premise that "worlding" our frame for reading Arab-American or Anglophone-Arab literature is imperative. Still it seems her argument is, to some extent, predicated on moving beyond the limitations of previous narrower definitions of Arab diaspora literature to inaugurate a new literary formation that is in part generation- and language-based. This dimension of her work seems to lack a certain intellectual generosity for the scholarship that has emerged over the past twenty years on Arab hyphenated identities. While our lens in the early millennial period may have shifted from an exploration of hyphenated identity formation, I am certain that without the work of pioneering writers and scholars who strived for years to define, analyze, and contextualize Arab-immigrant identities, we would not have American publishers willing to publish and market this bold and varied corpus of Anglophone Lebanese works. Furthermore, as numerous scholars have noted, in a post 9/11 context, Muslim identity has become increasingly racialized and Muslim literature has become one of the new hot literary categories among American and European reading publics. Without a thorough understanding of the history of racial and cultural bias in many of these Western locations, it is impossible to see just how certain reductive and essentialized ways of thinking have come to permeate our contemporary national culture. Previous studies on Arab and Arab-American literatures did just that—exploding these categories and reductive stereotypes—and are a reminder of how misguided (and dangerous) such modes of thinking can be.

Overall Hout's work is a strong and important contribution to the literary criticism of Lebanese and, specifically, Arab Anglophone literature. Her close readings of these texts remind us that the sensibilities of this newer generation of writers have changed a great deal, particularly for a multi-lingual, multi-cultural terrain such as Lebanon. Many of the novels she has chosen reveal an edgier if not more sophisticated literary sensibility, influenced by both Arabic and Anglophone literary traditions. Furthermore, her emphasis on reading these works through a post-civil war lens is innovative and highlights the hegemonic role of war (both the civil war and the ongoing sectarian strife) on the Lebanese psyche within or outside the country. For both the generalist and the specialist reader, Hout's text offers a fine overview of the central themes in Lebanese diaspora writing. At

its core, it provides a powerful argument for why we need to be reading these rich if often dark novels.