

*Literary Neo-Orientalism and the Arab Uprisings: Tensions in English, French and German Language Fiction*

Julia Wurr

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Frédéric Volpi describes in his foreword Julia Wurr's new book as a "most timely contribution ... to the contemporary debates about the representation of Muslim societies in a globalized literary culture" (ix). I agree: Wurr's monograph, adapted from her doctoral thesis, compares English, French and German-language novels about the Arab Uprisings, by diasporic and non-diasporic authors. This selection provides an interesting and productive survey in and of itself, inviting useful questions about "authentic" Arab writing, and how the demands of the Western literary market shape this and aestheticize a sense of Otherness. Wurr identifies this as an aesthetic pattern of "precarity, affective masculinity, and terror" (22). This method signals a productive move forward beyond using novels as anthropological data for the field of Arab literary studies in the Western academy. Instead, Wurr's project chimes with recent work in the field which is more interested in Arab novels' aesthetic properties, and the values and stakes that these register. Most compelling is Wurr's assertion that this aesthetic provides "an ambivalent and profitable gamble with fear" (21) for the Western literary market, which she evidences in two main ways. The first is that depictions of the Arab Uprisings show subjects especially given to affect, "violence, lust and passivity," who are unable to organize themselves into a democracy (21). The second builds on the former by engendering "securitization of people from an Islamicate background ... as an existential threat to the West" (21).

The early chapters make a much-needed intervention in the Western model of explaining the 2011 Uprisings. Readers may be interested in putting Wurr's work alongside that of Nouri Gana, who asserts that they "would make little sense if presented separately from the longer histories of discontent" (Gana 2). This chapter is especially exciting as Wurr considers how such Western models of revolution refer to the uprisings as "failures" and instead argues for a more holistic approach. This aligns with Gana's theory that the Uprisings were "a complex chain of ... micronarratives whose chapters have been (and are being) written in concert" (2), which Wurr considers via histories as well as futures yet to come. To my mind, Wurr successfully evidences the "present of continuing revolutionary potential" (40) by offering a compelling survey of texts about the Uprisings by Arab writers in translation, in the diaspora, and most interestingly by Western

“experts,” providing a comprehensive view of what the market is offering to readers.

Wurr’s analysis is attuned not only to the form and content of the novels that she is engaging with, but also to their marketability. For instance, she points out that Ben Jelloun’s fictionalization of the days leading up to Bouazizi’s self-immolation in *Par Le Feu*, the spark of the Uprisings, is marketed as an account which shares the “truth.” This chapter’s close readings culminate in Wurr’s excellent exploration of the story itself as a commodity in *Frühling der Barbaren*, where the motif of a camel offers “a bitter parable on the connection between Orientalism, cultural capitalism, precarity and the ethics of global responsibility” (84). Wurr, following Judith Butler, makes a compelling case for reading these texts through a reversal of “proximity and distance which determine the way in which the precarity of others translates into ethical demands” (88).

One of the strongest chapters, “Affective Masculinity and the Arab Uprisings: Adam Thirwell’s *Kapow!* and Jochen Beyse’s *Rebellion: Zwischenbericht*,” could be read usefully alongside Hisham Sharabi’s *Neopatriarchy* (1992). This chapter is likely to be one of the most highly cited in this monograph, ironically due to the preoccupation of Western critics with matters of Islamicate sexuality and gender. Wurr’s chapter, however, astutely turns this preoccupation on its head through enjoyable close readings and commentary which always alerts us to the fact that these novels represent the Western imaginary. One of the most interesting aspects of Wurr’s argument here is that “both texts include ergodic elements ... and thus require the recipient to actively participate” in the construction of such texts, and by extension the tropes in question (139). This aspect of Wurr’s argument carefully considers the responsibility of the reader and the market; indeed the reader’s place in the attention economy comes to mind here, which, like *Kapow!* and *Rebellion*, opens “different spatiotemporal dimension[s] which transcend geographical boundaries” (140). Wurr’s commentary shares “the playful and ironic handling of responsibility in representations of sexualised securitisation” with the texts in question (142). I look forward to seeing where Wurr might go next with this line of enquiry in her future publications. Finally, Wurr engages with “the Islamist Rage Boy,” a trope which does not represent any “real people” but is a “representation of terror which finds aestheticized expression in this figuration” (159). This is another chapter which will be highly cited, as Wurr engages with aspects of violence and titillation; following the previous chapter, this asks the reader to consider their own complicity in what the market has generated in this regard.

Wurr includes some pleasing, playful flourishes such as the motifs of “beards, bombs, burkas and belly dancing” (19) in the introductory

chapters. Wurr's playfulness in tone actually belies the seriousness of her project: to render literary Neo-orientalism ridiculous is to expose the illogical presumptions upon which it relies. What is helpful about this project, and what is so exciting to me, is that this is the first book-length project which, as Wurr highlights, offers a critical view of how Europe has imagined the Uprisings in recent years. By taking such a large survey across languages Wurr demonstrates the importance of neo-Orientalizing to European imaginaries of the Islamicate world, and thus to how the European market imagines itself in relationship to this (largely imaginary) Other. The use of vignettes from Wurr's selected novels open each chapter. Across the monograph readers contrast Adhaf Soueif's discussion of the Uprisings in Egypt as part of a longer history of civil discontent with, in another chapter, the "palm trees, exotic lighting, mysterious music, stunning colours, [and] sacred camel" (59) of Jonas Lüscher's *Barbarian Spring*. These vignettes at the opening of each chapter remind us that the novels that Wurr is engaging with are themselves knowledge-producing artefacts. Such artifacts demonstrate how "global interdependencies" produce "the desolate living conditions" (59) from which the Arab Uprisings emerged.

Overall, this monograph is an intellectual achievement in both its argument and the practical elements of bringing together novels across three languages. Yet, the reader who cannot read in one or more of these languages is still brought along with Wurr's purposeful readings and commentary as a guide. The result is a useful text which would be at home on history, sociology, political science and literary studies shelves, as Wurr imbricates and offers useful new ideas to these disciplines. Further, Wurr is sure to remind us that these novels are not distinct from academic commentary – in fact many of the authors Wurr cites are understood to be "area experts." This book has original close readings, and provides helpful historicizations of a variety of concepts – from the "Orient" as a homogenizing conflation of ideas, to "The War on Terror." The key contribution of this text is not just its useful close readings across three language traditions, but insodoing Wurr compellingly investigates how the West tacitly imagines itself in opposition to "beards, bombs, burkas and belly dancing" (19).

### Works Cited

Gana, Nouri. "Introduction: Collaborative Revolutionism." *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Nouri Gana, Edinburgh UP, 2013.

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