

# Book Reviews

Syrine Hout, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in the Diaspora*  
Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2012.

Reviewed by Norman Saadi Nikro

The remarkable production of fiction in Lebanon emerging from the long years of civil violence (1975-1990) and an ongoing restless aftermath is by no means confined to the Arabic language. Proliferating in a number of other languages, English has arguably become the preeminent non-Arab language in which contemporary diasporic Lebanese fiction is composed.

Similar to the contemporary Lebanese novel in Arabic, Lebanese Anglophone fiction is just as stylistically adventurous and obsessively experimental. As Edward Said once observed, the Lebanese novel emerging from the ravages of the civil war is characterized by the impossibility of novelistic form, symptomatically compressed into autobiography and memoir, corrupting any neat distinction between fact and fiction, presenting somewhat of a departure from a realist aesthetic that had to a large extent informed Arab fiction up to the late 1970s. And yet, Anglophone Lebanese fiction is more compelled to wrestle with an experience of diaspora and exile, of situating home as elsewhere, and articulating belonging as an unhomely prism refracting paths of migration.

Drawing on her research and publications over a ten year period, the Beirut literary scholar Syrine Hout addresses this contemporary literary production, presenting critical readings of eleven Anglophone Lebanese novels. Most of these have been produced by writers living in North America, though also from England and Australia. Hout's study includes four works by the San Francisco based Rabih Alameddine, two by the Canadian based Rawi Hage, one from United States based Patricia Sarrafian Ward, two from the Australian repatriated Nada Awar Jarrar, as well as novels by Tony Hanania and Nathalie Abi-Ezzi, both located in Britain. Hout's attention to this geographical scattering of literary production marks out a critical site of analysis. In doing so, her book is timely not only because it identifies and discusses relevant themes, but because she develops certain conceptual terms of reference by which to map out an appropriate critical terminology.

Accordingly, as her subtitle suggests, home and diaspora are not to be assumed as opposites, but rather practices of literary production engaging the reverberating force of emotional distance, of separation and the murmuring impulses of longing by which this separation informs the composition of narrative fiction.

The emotional implications and literary associations of home, then, are central to Hout's discussions, whereby she traces the significance of home along varied trajectories. In other words, the notion of home she critically situates through her close readings of the novels has to be understood as both singular and plural – a sense of Lebanon as place mediated by emotional attachments having to be articulated from elsewhere, or through returning to Lebanon from elsewhere; and a destabilizing sense of place informed through its irrevocable dispersal. As she points out in her introduction, her concern is with “the different meanings and reformulations of home, be it Lebanon as a nation, a particular dwelling house or apartment, a host country, an irretrievable pre-war childhood, a state of in-between dwelling, a portable state of mind, a utopian (political) ideal and/or the narrative itself” (p. 14).

Where the work of her writers articulates an ambivalent sense of Lebanon as home, the writers themselves carry an ambivalent experience of having their childhoods defined by the civil war.

This is an important aspect of Hout's focus: born in Lebanon during the civil war or shortly before its outbreak in 1975, most of her writers were neither old enough to understand the violence and deprivation through memories of its prehistory, nor young enough to restrict their memories to those passed on by their parents' generation. Consequently, as Hout puts into relief, "these authors are unique because they can rely neither on undiluted recollections of direct experiences nor on purely imaginative reconstructions of the older writers' testimonies" – these last constituting novelists, such as Elias Khoury and Hanan al-Shaykh, who not only write in Arabic but more significantly produced their first literary works in the midst of the civil war.

This insight comes to have some bearing on Hout's discussions of the overlapping and layered tensions between home and diaspora, as well as related registers of memory and trauma. The first of these assemblages (home/diaspora) informs Part I, "Homesickness and the Sickness of Home", while the second (memory/trauma) informs Part II, "Trauma Narratives: The Scars of War". In the first, Alemeddine's *Koolaid's: The Art of War* (1998), articulates a notion of home free from a nostalgic desire to return to an imagined pristine state of belonging and national identity. Alemeddine's fragmented composition itself – what Hout describes as a "polyphonic and multi-generic collage" – works to stylistically render the desire for home complicated by the impossibility of satisfying the desire with any conclusiveness.

Likewise, Tony Hanania's *Unreal City* (1999) hinges on a sense of home that cannot be untangled from the tension between an objective awareness of place and the subjective hues and stammers by which place is rendered unfamiliar. In the second chapter of Part I, Hout extends this thematic discussion to Alemeddine's *The Perv: Stories* (1999) and Jarrar's first novel, *Somewhere, Home* (2003).

If the emotional complex between home and diaspora is traversed by an experience that comes to inform the very style of literary production, then memory and trauma would render this relationship between experience and its literary articulation even more compelling. In part II, Hout draws on trauma studies to demonstrate how Alemeddine's *I, the Devine: A Novel in First Chapters* (2002) and Ward's *The Bullet Collection* (2003) can be read as trauma fiction. Both novels situate the past as a disjointed, episodic narrative that works to destabilize the present as an undifferentiated site of self-awareness. The repetitive style of *I, the Devine* and *The Bullet Collection* somehow simulate an ambivalence that defines trauma: a simultaneous demand for, though pathological refusal of, the articulation of narrative and historical awareness.

Hout's reading of these novels extends to a consideration of how they go against the grain of the propensity of Lebanese public and political cultures to forget the civil war. Taking her cue from the work of Cathy Caruth, Hout suggests that through the very ambivalence of trauma it becomes possible to situate historical reference, whereby personal experience is set against memories of historical events. As Hout remarks on Ward's protagonist: "Marianna's angry voice delivers a (self) critical trauma narrative which combats public amnesia", and thus "her testimony is both powerful and timely" (pp. 101-102).

Parts III and IV – "Playing with Fire at Home and Abroad" and "Exile versus Repatriation" – again begin with a novel by Alemeddine, *The Hakawati* (2008), and then Abi-Ezzi's *A Girl Made of Dust* (2008). In these final sections Hout also discusses Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* (2007) and *Cockroach* (2009). Hage's gritty realism is contrasted with the more elegiac tones of Jarrar's *A Good Land* (2009). Where Hage's novel cannot imagine a possible return to Lebanon – which Hout suggests

may well have provided an interesting twist to the protagonist's inability to come to terms with his traumatic experiences of the civil war – the more romantic impulses of Jarrar's third novel bring some sort of closure to the “emotional geography” of the narrative.

For Hout, post-war Anglophone Lebanese literature constitutes variable sites for a creative articulation of loss and renewal, across and in between social, cultural and emotional geographies. And yet, as the personal is set against a difficult history of violence and deprivation, this literary output works to render the past a pressing concern for the present. Her study ends on this point: “Remembering resists omission, making art in general and literature in particular a necessary channel for personal and historical agency in a time of deep emotional loss and suffering” (p. 202). This very peculiar and somewhat obsessive literary style somehow renders Lebanese Anglophone fiction compelling in terms of the entwinement of personal trajectories and historical destinies.

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