

# SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

April 7, 2015

*Kafka and the Anglophone Arabs, or, The Starting Point of Theorizing Arab Immigrant Narratives:  
A Review Essay of Wail Hassan's Immigrant Narratives*

Wail S. Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*, Oxford University Press, 2014, 278 pp., \$29.95 US (pbk), 9780199354979.

In *Immigrant Narratives* Wail Hassan demonstrates exactly how to achieve an insightful critical intervention in literary studies. He successfully highlights the ways in which English-language *mahjar* (immigrant) texts—from Ameen Rihani to Rabih Alameddine—deliberate, debate, and negotiate their textual ontology as minor literature. It is in this process of intertextual negotiation, rather than in the stagnant singularity of each text, that Hassan's study orchestrates a pluralistic synergy in order to create a dialogue among those otherwise seemingly disparate Arab voices. The concluding statement of his study is a powerful declaration that we must learn to read the marginalia, or the peripherals of the so-called center, in order better assess and critique the very formation of the canon: “[I]mmigrant and minor literatures have a role to play in re-conceptualizing literary studies beyond the restrictive paradigm of the national canon.... If taken seriously in pedagogical and critical practice, as they should be, they could help expose the nationalist and culturalist roots of the institutional configuration of literary studies” (224).

Hassan does exactly that: he exposes, with expertise and versatility, the fragile nationalisms that have for many years dictated our canonical choices and forced us to look only within national borders and never outside of them. Hassan's Introduction alone, in my opinion, is a significant contribution unto itself, and will be of tremendous use for students in Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies, Ethnic Studies, Middle/Near Eastern Studies, in addition to Anglophone Arab literature. While Hassan's is not the first and most likely will not be the last study on Arab immigrant narratives, his work makes an important addition to the field and will be read alongside works by Ferial Ghazoul, Evelyn Shakir, Layla Al Maleh, and Steven Salaita.

Hassan's book consists of a Preface, an Introduction and nine chapters that follow a semi-historical line of development. As he explains in the Introduction, the focus of his examination is "only the English-language texts of [Arab] immigrants" (5). Methodologically, Hassan adopts three seemingly interrelated theories: minor literature (Deleuze and Guattari), postcolonialism (Edward Said, Martin Bernal, María Rosa Menocal, Samir Amin, Yvonne Haddad), and cultural translation (Antoine Berman, Carol Maier, Lawrence Venuti). He ties all of these theories together as he explores the writings of 15 Arab authors over the span of one hundred years in both Britain and the US in order to construct his formidable argument about Arab immigrants' relation to Orientalism.

Chapter 1 begins with an articulation of the genesis of Arab American literature and, predictably enough, engages Ameen Rihani's literary, intellectual, and political project, or what Hassan calls Rihani's "translational literature" (50). This is where the analytical comparatist in Hassan is at his best. By dissecting Rihani's multi-genre oeuvre, particularly his novel *The Book of Khalid* (1911), through a juxtaposition to Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, Hassan situates the Arab immigrant's intellectual dilemma in an exclusivist "West"; i.e., as confusedly as a protagonist/author overwhelmed by an overriding Orientalism could possibly be. Hassan draws our attention to how Rihani's novel becomes a record of history and an index of "the historical, ideological, and discursive conditions of the Arab world, Europe and the United States during that period" (58), one which in the very act of "translating" the Arab world to the West, reveals the immigrant's sense of bewilderment and alienation in confronting xenophobic and self-glorifying cultures.

Chapter 2 examines Khalil Gibran's failed project of bi-cultural mediation, which despite—and perhaps because of—the fame it brought him in the West, created a false sense of transcendence over an insurmountable Orientalism. Hassan characterizes this as the attempt to "negate Orientalist negation through Orientalist transcendence," a popularity and a reward "ironic and indicative of the forces that still shape public views of Arabs today" (77). The autobiographical writings of George Haddad, Abraham Rihbany, George Hamid, and Salom Rizk (Chapters 3 and 4) reveal multiple variations on the Orientalism theme, which are more or less influenced by such questions as cultural opposition (Haddad), theological Occidentalism (Rihbany), patriotism and non-translational assimilationism (Hamid and Rizk).

Chapter 5, "Exilic Memoirs," or what could also be rightly titled "1948," brings together the public disillusionment with and incisive critique of the discourse of Orientalism in the works of Aziz Shihab, Fawaz Turki, and Edward Said. "Nowhere," argues Hassan forcibly, "is the truth of Deleuze and Guattari's observation on the conjunction of the private and the collective, the personal and the political, more evident than in the memoirs of the Palestinians exiled in 1948" (112). Said's *Out of Place* and Turki's three memoirs—*The Disinherited*, *Soul in Exile*, and *Exile's Return*—are cases in point, synecdoches that epitomize the tragedy of 1948, the loss of Palestine, the subsequent Diaspora of Palestinians, and the immigrant/exile's working through the predicament of statelessness and loss of homeland.

Hassan then proceeds to focus on the accounts of two Egyptian academics, Ihab Hassan and Leila Ahmed (Chapter 6). Ihab Hassan's confessional narrative of his willful departure, *Out of Egypt*, where "the sun rose in the clear, dry dawn of history and now has set, perhaps never to rise again," to "a land violently dreaming the world into a better place" (Ihab Hassan as quoted in book under review, 144) is sharply contrasted to Ahmed's *A Border Passage*—an autobiography of connectedness rather than escape, especially the embrace of Muslim feminist postcoloniality.

Continuing with Egypt as the scene of departure, Chapter 7 is a fresh look at Ahdaf Soueif's translational literature, with emphasis on her two novels, *In the Eye of the Sun* and *The Map of Love*, with an emphasis on their subversion of the Oriental romance and their rewriting of British imperial history. In Chapters 8 and 9, Hassan discusses the emergence of what he calls "minor literature within minor literature" (199), a category that includes Muslim immigrant fiction, as exemplified in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (Chapter 8), and "an unlikely bedfellow in Arab immigrant queer fiction," the writings of of Ramzi Salti and Rabih Alameddine (Chapter 9).

Hassan's project is doubtlessly ambitious: over one hundred years of immigrant narratives spanning two continents held together by a syncretism of theories. This perspective makes the accomplishments of this book all the more impressive. He begins the book, then, by adeptly drawing a substantive parallelism between Deleuze and Guattari's study of minor literature and his own novel considerations of Arab American and Arab British immigrant literature authored in English. To be sure, Hassan is aware of the limitations in Deleuze and Guattari's theory; i.e., how its three characteristics (the deterritorialization of language, the alignment of the individual and collective intrigue, and the political nature of individual enunciation and action), while immensely useful, must be qualified and implemented only in shifting degrees. Therefore, Deleuze and Guattari's theory should only be employed, Hassan contends, as "a useful starting point for the interpretation of Arab immigrant writing," but must also "be supplemented," he emphasizes, "by postcolonial and translation theory" (4-7).

The interlocking varieties of Deleuze and Guattari's "minor literature" and Said's *Orientalism*, however, deserve further critical investigation. First there is more to Deleuze and Guattari's deterritorialization than is invoked in Hassan's study. Deleuze and Guattari introduce the term as the desire not to be interpreted, translated, or decoded, since each minority, including the cultural translator or interpreter, suffers from what they call "the powerful signs which massacre desire."<sup>1</sup> This is exactly what they discover in Kafka's works—a *rhizome*—a resistance to translation or crystallization into a unified form, and a complete evasion of the linguistic models that seek to identify and localize it, where the responsibility lies upon the reader, and not the author, to make the connections. Secondly, Deleuze and Guattari's study of Kafka is not a study of deterritorialization in the geographical or thematic sense, but of linguistic forms and modes of expression. They see him as a Jew in Prague, a writer of the untranslatable, who uses language cleverly enough to collapse the particularity of his Jewish-ness into the universality of the human experience.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore not quite clear how Deleuze and Guattari's observations of Kafka's unique linguistic style can be useful in the context of English-language Arab immigrant narratives, not to mention the fact that Kafka scholars have raked Deleuze and Guattari over the proverbial coals for misunderstanding and misappropriating Kafka's *Lebhaftigkeit*.<sup>3</sup>

Going back a hundred years, performing a triangular reading of Arab immigrant narratives composed in English by way of Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of "minor literature," Said's *Orientalism*, and Venuti's "cultural translation," the Arabness of writers such as Rihani, Gibran, Haddad, Rizk, Hassan, Ahmed, and Said morph into different complex forms and shapes than what singular readings of these writers reveal. The

<sup>1</sup> Mark D. Seem, "Interview: Félix Guattari," *Diacritics* 4:3 (1974), 41.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure* (Paris, 1957), 29-50.

<sup>3</sup> For more on critical reactions to Deleuze and Guattari, see Lowell Edmunds, "Kafka on Minor Literature," *German Studies Review*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (May 2010), 351-374.

problems faced in this study are not necessarily Hassan's alone but are inherent in the theoretical and intercontinental framework of all Anglophone Arab narratives. For instance, Evelyn Shakir's pioneering study of Arab American literature, which in part informs Hassan's, divides the tradition arbitrarily according to three historical stages, inspired mainly by political events and major authors.<sup>4</sup> Towards the end of his study Hassan makes the disclaimer that, "My preference for 'Arab British' stems from my focus in this book on the work of immigrants as distinct from that of travelers" (158). But this is a moot point. Whether he could validate it or not, one remarkable shortcoming I find in Hassan's study is that he leaves out such important figures as Waguih Ghali, Jamal Mahjoub, Soraya Antonius, Hisham Matar, and Fadia Faqir seemingly arbitrarily.

In its common usage the term "Arab" is applied to everyone of Arab descent, thus, in effect, treating it as a non-historical epistemological category. It was, in fact, Said who mapped out the problematics of this usage in Orientalist discourse. In the context of the work under review, we can see how this category masks significant distinctions between early, mid, and late twentieth-century Arab immigrants, their originating homelands and their final destinations; between Jewish Arabs, Christian Arabs, and Muslim Arabs; between rich Arabs and poor Arabs; between English-language preparatory school educated Arabs and Arabic-language public school educated Arabs; between religious Arabs and irreligious Arabs, not to speak of the myriad of differences that each of these designations carries when it comes to questions of acceptance, rejection, assimilation, naturalization, etc. Although Hassan's study is organized historically, and watershed moments of historical changes are mentioned throughout the book—e.g., 1948—the connections are often tenuous and biased toward supporting the thematic parallels he wishes to make. For instance, there is a palpable absence of history in his treatment of Ihab Hassan's exile than with respect to Said's, where colonial history and the loss of Palestine are paramount. Perennial themes do work well to unify the book's thesis, but "Arabness" remains a term in need of significant clarification. Assuming of course that there is a single homogeneity to Arabness at work, whether we choose to locate it in language or culture, or both, there are still variegated historical, political, social, and economic complexities that distinguish their migrant conditions in Britain and the US.

Steven Salaita's work on Arab American literature, for instance, argues that even though there is a shared sense of sameness to all Arabs wherever they are, there are still "different cultural values" among Anglophone Arabs "as a result of their different social circumstances" (35).<sup>5</sup> Consequently, other scholars, including Dalal Sarnou in her brilliant study of the narratives of Arab Anglophone women<sup>6</sup> and Amal Talaat Abdelrazek's work on contemporary Arab American women writers and their hyphenated identities,<sup>7</sup> have chosen to restrict their framework to certain themes within a single country. Hassan, too, acknowledges the difference between the socio-historical conditions of Arab immigration to Britain and the US (14), although he does not dwell much on the social symbolisms and ramifications of those differences throughout his study. Furthermore, this acknowledgement alone is insufficient to make those narratives comprehensible either as stories arranged on a

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<sup>4</sup> Evelyn Shakir, "Arab-American Literature," in *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States: A Sourcebook to Our Multicultural Literary Heritage* ed., Alpana Sharma Knippling, (Westport, Conn: Greenwood, 1996), 3-18.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Salaita, *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> See Dalal Sarnou, "Narratives of Arab Anglophone Women and the Articulation of a Major Discourse in a Minor Literature," *International Studies: Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal*, Vol.16, No.1 (2014), 65-81.

<sup>7</sup> See Amal Talaat Abdelrazek, *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossing* (New York: Cambria Press, 2008).

shelf ready to be picked up and read, or as part of a presumed geographical and ideological whole to be reckoned with, despite the temptation of thematic comparisons. We ought to approach them, rather, as an index of the very historical conditions and circumstances, both at home and abroad, that shatter and disconnect this very whole. It would have illuminated Hassan's study more had he highlighted the psychology of departure at work in all these narratives—one which is welcomed by some (e.g., Rizk, Hassan) but is forced upon others (e.g., Shihab, Turki). In *Immigrant Narratives* the dialogue occurs within the discourse of Orientalism, leaving the reader to wonder if there ever could be an outside to Orientalism, and if so where to locate it: in nostalgic translational narrative or in narratives that depict a horrendous negation of the self and the native land? And why stop there? Isn't this negation or rejection itself a mourning of our divided "selves at risk," to invoke Ihab Hassan, a working through the un-healable rift of leaving the homeland behind, since, in essence, to become a hyphenated Arab—a dashed Arab—is to lose the whole, forever?

Hassan's study also triggers but does not necessarily address a vital cultural/translational question of how "Arabs," whatever this rich designation implies, who settle in these two particular countries respond to the experiences and demands of life there, and how those demands have changed from Rihani to Soueif. This question invites even more specific queries about various issues including, on the one hand, the meaning of citizenship, its acquisition, its revocability at the slightest provocation, and questions of tolerance, hospitality, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Arabism, deep-seated racism, institutional discrimination, etc. On the other hand, there remains the question of how to live as an Arab in the West, how to adapt to the church and the strip club, the mosque and the wine store, the celebration of sexual differences, religious pluralism, premarital sex, the lost value of virginity, the rarity of halal food, the absence of Bible/Qur'an teaching at school, the right to choose, to leave or to choose not to choose religion, etc. In short, how to live in a secular society, study, work, use a public restroom, worship, fall in love, marry or divorce in the absence of the familiar; or, how to forge a home within home or find schools suitable for the Christian or Muslim sensibilities of Arab immigrants' parents. For instance, though Said and Turki have both written narratives on Palestine, the actual exilic conditions of those two writers are completely different from one another. What roles, then, do education, class, and cultural tradition play in conditioning the moral values and lifestyles of Arabs in *mahjar*?

Still it is important to locate the void and point to it. Hassan did exceedingly well in drawing our attention to the fact that Anglo-American Arab immigrant narratives have until now fallen through the disciplinary cracks within the academy. But what are the Anglo-American values against which we are testing Hassan's theories and narratives of Arab immigrants wherever they hail from? What, if anything at all, could a shared way of life be for all "Arabs" who make their home in Anglo-American spaces? What precisely is the role of cultural translation in British and US public life? Who is reading this immigrant translational literature in the first place? The US enjoys a sweeping geographical space with a troubled historical relation to its land and to the world that is different from that of the British Empire, of which the US was once a colony. America is different from what it used to be fifty years ago. Even today, Utahn Americans differ from the Americans in Las Vegas, as much as San Franciscans may differ from Nebraskans. Even in the same state, the experience of Arab Californians would differ from one city to another or from one county to the next, based on the nuances of local cultural values and practices that distinguish life in say Orange County from life in Alameda County, and from Modesto to Berkeley, not to speak of other states like North Carolina, Wisconsin, or Texas. In other words, a lived

experience of an Arab in those various places is bound to produce different perspectives and different narratives.

In addition, while Hassan shows expert knowledge of Said's critical analysis of Orientalist discourse under the aegis of Foucault (7-8), it is not exactly clear how he makes connections between Said's thesis and the position of Arab immigrants in the US and Britain. This is a significant gap given that this is the framework that Hassan believes "shapes the production and reception of their work [i.e., Arab immigrant narratives]" (xii). To be sure, we are all indebted to Foucault for his dramatic reshuffling of historical continuities. He slowed down the brutal machine of subject-based knowledge formation so we could see through the cracks of Europe's narcissistic transcendentalism in manufacturing history. Periodization thus served Foucault's project of the archeology of knowledge quite well. In effect, his contribution was a wrench thrown in the works of historiographical nationalisms and an articulation of what remains one of the most significant contributions to epistemological thought in recent history.

Thus Foucault's periodization, which in part envelops Said's theory of Orientalism, is crucial, indeed unavoidable, for a better assessment of historical narratives. However, it is true that periodization remains an intellectual exercise, a fictive carving of the past based mostly on presumed epistemological shifts, a slicing of history into graspable pieces of time that we can digest only at our own risk. Yet this periodization becomes the very postulate for Said's study when he takes "the late Eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point" and discusses Orientalism in post-Enlightenment Europe as "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it."<sup>8</sup> This is not at all a critique of Orientalism, for the book's benefits are enormous. But when he speaks of Orientalism, Said means mainly, although not exclusively, "British and French cultural enterprise,"<sup>9</sup> as domains that allowed European identity to view itself "as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures."<sup>10</sup> Unlike Hassan Hanafi's *Introduction to Occidentalism* (in Arabic), a project that Hanafi started in Egypt more than two decades ago to study the West from the perspective of Arabic and Islamic traditions, Said's book unmasks the ideology of Orientalism and Eurocentrism. Using Foucault (and to some extent Raymond Williams), he inescapably reproduces it for us. His work, as he confirms, is "within the umbrella of Western hegemony of the Orient."<sup>11</sup> If the Orient is a fabrication in Western eyes, none of the authors in Hassan's study are. How then do we theorize the narratives of Arab immigrants in foreign spaces using a work that replicates, theoretically, discursively, inadvertently or not, the very discourse it seeks to deconstruct?

So if we were to study the textual experiments of Arab immigrants in both Britain and the United States, then we would require specificity of time and space, and just as importantly a freedom from Orientalist periodization and the shackles of theoretical framing altogether. Enlightening as it is, Said's *Orientalism* will never allow those texts to speak for themselves and will never grant the benefit of the doubt or the license of independence to any of those fifteen authors, which begs the following questions: Why isn't the deterritorialization of Anglo-Arab narratives itself a deterritorialization from the boxes of fixed European literary theory itself? What would Arab immigrants' narrative look like

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<sup>8</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 3; cited on page 7 in work under review.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

without Deleuze and Guattari's controversial theory? How differently will we understand the experience of Arab immigrants without Said's *Orientalism*? Aren't these possibilities worth exploring at all? Can we carve out a different path? This, I believe, should be our starting point.

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Citation Information

Salama, Mohammad, *Kafka and the Anglophone Arabs, or, The Starting Point of Theorizing Arab Immigrant Narratives: A Review Essay of Wail Hassan's Immigrant Narratives*, *SCTIW Review*, April 7, 2015. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/502>.

ISSN: 2374-9288