

# SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

July 7, 2015

*“Beirut is no longer for us”:  
A Review Essay of Ghenwa Hayek’s Beirut, Imagining the City*

Ghenwa Hayek, *Beirut, Imagining the City: Space and Place in Lebanese Literature*, I.B. Tauris, 2015, 268 pp., \$99.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781784530150.

*Bayrut battalit la-ilna* (Beirut is no longer for us) is a refrain that Ghenwa Hayek uses as an explanatory device in the epilogue to her new study, *Beirut, Imagining the City: Space and Place in Lebanese Literature*. At first glance, this might seem to be a pessimistic way to express how Beirut is engaged with and embedded within Lebanese literature. This is not the case for Hayek, however. She invokes these words to untangle the complications of a Lebanese identity at once so tied to the city and at the same time so alienated from it. The ongoing tension between Beirut’s role as the quintessential symbol of Lebanon and the foil for the “more authentic Lebanon” of the mountains is captured perfectly in this expression. It also sums up the feelings of a broad cross-section of Lebanese society about the downtown reconstruction project and the ways in which vast swathes of the city have become inaccessible to ordinary people. To say “Beirut is no longer for us,” Hayek claims, is not defeatism. She argues instead that, “in its stubborn refusal to give into this defeatism, despite all else, Lebanese literature is a form of cultural production that continues to fully insist upon its connection to, and engagement with, the city—and the Lebanese polity” (200).

Though Hayek identifies literary expression as a location in which people can challenge despair, *Beirut, Imagining the City* is not idealistic or naïve about the place of literature in society. Rather, this book is a solid and serious work of scholarship that examines literary texts in a number of different ways. Hayek is particularly interested in engaging a range of theoretical ideas around space and place. She uses Beirut, as well as the city vs. mountains dichotomy that has so defined Lebanese national identity, as the location to work through them. Offering readings of nine specific novels, including two graphic novels, Hayek’s book meticulously traces a number of the most crucial literary, aesthetic, and visual choices made in these writings, contextualizing them with contemporary literary production and other scholarship. Though it is not primarily focused on gender, Hayek pays close attention to how expressions of gender affect the conceptualization and articulation of space and place in novels by both male and female writers. As the opening to this review suggests, the alienation that the reconstruction of Beirut has produced is another of the powerful lenses through which Hayek explores these literary texts.

There are three specific interventions that Hayek's book makes that I will highlight here, each of which is important in its own right, but how they work together is equally if not more important. The first is its theoretical contribution to Arabic literary studies by engaging concepts and ideas not only in the context of this relatively small field but also in conversation with literary studies more generally. The second is its contribution to the smaller, but active subfield of Lebanese literary studies. The third is the study of Lebanon, and Beirut in particular, from a multifaceted and multidisciplinary perspective. How these all come together makes Hayek's book particularly valuable. *Beirut, Imagining the City* brings literary studies alive and connects scholarship that can often be abstract to real life issues. Hayek is successful in linking the study of novels written in Arabic in Lebanon to their specific contexts in meaningful ways, while at the same time engaging them in debates happening outside the Arab world in broader literary studies.

Hayek's theoretical intervention, focusing on conceptual notions of space and place, is welcome in the field of Arabic literary studies. She outlines the key issues she wishes to explore, in particular building on Nirvana Tanoukhi's call for an exploration of "scale."<sup>1</sup> *Beirut, Imagining the City* thinks through the scale of space and place from a number of diverse perspectives, while remaining focused on the nuances and specificities of her literary corpus. Hayek never sacrifices these textual readings to the abstract and theoretical, and this is one of the book's strengths. Her tone and focus always balances the larger inquiries she is making with insights into the real, material situation of twentieth and twenty-first century Lebanon, specifically Beirut.

The third intervention mentioned above is related to this and crucial here. *Beirut, Imagining the City* is not only useful as a literary study; though this is its framework, Hayek also provides trenchant insights into the destruction and reconstruction of Beirut by engaging historical and sociological analyses. She does this in numerous ways, in particular by relating her arguments directly to the scholarship of historians like Leila Fawaz, for example, and also Saree Makdisi and Samir Khalaf who both critique the Solidere project and the reconstruction of downtown Beirut. She builds upon their insights, of course, but her analyses of space and place through literature also add to and enhance theirs. Hayek's deep knowledge of Lebanon—the complications and nuances of its history and politics—shine through in her study and she connects her theoretical inquiries about space and place to the very real tension(s) between the city and mountains. She is sensitive to how this relationship has changed over time, not only as evidenced in literary texts but in real life terms as well.

As the second intervention outlined above indicates, there are quite a number of studies of Lebanese literature within the larger field of Arabic literary studies, perhaps enough to consider it a relatively prolific subfield. The body of scholarship about literature from Lebanon is largely concerned with the civil war, and quite a number of pieces are focused on women's writing. Many of these works speak to each other directly. Ghenwa Hayek's study actively participates in these conversations and as such it can be a crucial player in helping to define and advance the field. Some of the earlier studies like miriam cooke's *War's Other Voices* and Evelyne Accad's *Sexuality and War* were written during and just at the end of the

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<sup>1</sup> Nirvana Tanoukhi, "The scale of world literature," *New Literary History* 39, no. 3 (2008): 599-617. Hayek refers to this directly on pages 5-6 and 75-76.

civil war.<sup>2</sup> They focused on women's writing as opposed to, and as different from men's writing about the war. Many scholars have critiqued and been in conversation with these works and their ideas since then, including some important recent studies. Hayek is in conversation with many of these, in particular Elise Salem's *Constructing Lebanon*,<sup>3</sup> a history of one hundred years of Lebanese literature and its canonization, Ken Seigneurie's *Standing by the Ruins*,<sup>4</sup> a study of postwar Lebanese fiction, and Samira Aghacy's *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East Since 1967* which focuses on the literary construction of male gender identity.<sup>5</sup> It is important that Hayek genuinely takes up and often respectfully challenges ideas from this scholarship and also pushes them further.

It is not only on the level of concepts, frames, and ideas that *Beirut, Imagining the City* adds to the scholarship and conversations about Lebanese literature, but also in its close readings of literary texts. Hayek's study mainly treats canonical, or at least well-known, authors and their novels—though this is not exclusively true. Her careful readings of the nine texts she treats in the book all provide insights into questions about how space and place function in relation to urban and mountain-based understandings of what Lebanon is. They also help to explain some of the reasons behind and different ways of expressing the sentiments of Lebanese people—even Beirutis—that their city is no longer theirs.

Hayek first performs a double reading of Tawfiq Yusuf Awwad's *Tawabin Bayrut* (The Mills of Beirut) and Emily Nasrallah's *Tuyyur Aylul* (September Birds), both of which are classic pre-war texts and neither of which is translated into English. Placing them in their larger contexts, including in conversation with Layla Baalbaki's contemporary fiction, Hayek uses these novels to probe mountain-city dynamics. Her examination of both Awwad and Nasrallah's novels read them against the grain of previous readings, especially in understanding of gendered agency. She investigates the "feminist" impulses of both texts and the question of women's liberation in them in illuminating ways. Her next comparison is the way in which the war changes and transforms Beirut in three of the best known novels of Hanan al-Shaykh (*Barid Bayrut*, translated as *Beirut Blues*), Hoda Barakat (*Harith al-miyah*, translated as *The Tiller of Waters*) and Rachid al-Daif (*Azizi al-sayyid Kawabata*, translated as *Dear Mr. Kawabata*).

The book's fourth chapter, "Tracing Beirut in Contemporary Historical Novels," reads Rabea Jaber's *Bayrut madinat al-'alam* (Beirut, City of the World) with Alexandre Najjar's French-language novel, *Histoire de Beyrouth* (Story of Beirut) through the conceptual lens of historical fiction. This chapter takes the concept of post-memory as a way to think through the trend towards writing the city's history, even as it struggles to come to terms with and commemorate the almost two decades long civil war. The argument here for thinking about this "new historical fiction" as proposing an imagined past for Beirut is intriguing. The two novels here fit together very well and she uses Jaber as a sort of counterpoint to critique Najjar's predictably idealized, liberal, European-centered historical text, written in French.

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<sup>2</sup> See: miriam cooke, *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996) and Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East* (New York: New York University, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Elise Salem, *Constructing Lebanon: A Century of Literary Narratives* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Ken Seigneurie, *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Samira Aghacy, *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East Since 1967* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009).

I agree largely with Hayek's insightful analyses here, but found it somewhat frustrating that the only French-language text included in the study is one that fits so well with the dominant, preconceived narrative about francophone literature in Lebanon. While Najjar's historical fiction more generally—i.e., not only in this one particular novel—very much upholds myths of French supremacy and Arab backwardness, this is not the case of all francophone writers, though it is the stereotype. Hayek's analysis of Najjar very much reinforces this view of French-language fiction in the structure and argument of her book. Because I recently published a book on this subject, challenging these views about French-language literature and claiming alternative literary histories for this community, I am particularly attuned to this. Hayek is not to be faulted for not reading or engaging this book, *Native Tongue, Stranger Talk: The Arabic and French Literary Landscapes of Lebanon* (Syracuse University Press, 2014)—it appeared roughly at the same time that *Beirut, Imagining the City* was published. The point I am making here does not detract from Hayek's study of Lebanese literature or challenge her analyses at all. I bring in this study rather to nuance the perception of French-language literature from Lebanon.

One of *Native Tongue, Stranger Talk's* arguments is to demonstrate how many women writers subvert the genre of the “historical novel” and/or the “ethnographic novel” at the same time as they undermine the kind of narrative of French/francophone and/or Christian superiority and hegemony that a text like Najjar's relies upon. An example of a French-language postwar novel that interestingly contests these narratives is Dominique Eddé's *Cerf Volant (Kite)*. In this text, the elite French speaking character Mali (short for Maliha) falls in love with a Palestinian professor of Arabic literature and becomes politicized. Her earlier text, *Pourquoi il fait si sombre?* (Why is it so Dark?), is a more experimental, stream of consciousness narration that probes the im/possibility of writing about the war in a French-language novel. Hyam Yared's *La malédiction* (The Curse) has a similar political positioning to these two texts in undermining claims to Maronite superiority. An older novel like Vénus Khoury-Ghata's *Le fils empaillé* (The Son Stuffed with Straw) echoes very strongly within these newer works, and would be interestingly paired with the war novels of Hanan al-Shaykh or Hoda Barakat. While it is interesting to include a novel by a French-language author like Najjar among the Arabic-language authors explored by Hayek, his inclusion alone does very much reinforce this received wisdom.

The final chapter of Ghenwa Hayek's *Beirut, Imagining the City* is in some ways its best. It brings together an analysis of a little studied form—the graphic novel—with its analysis of contemporary, postwar Beirut through the insights built up in the previous chapters. This chapter delves into two relatively recent graphic novels, by Mazen Kerbaj and Lena Merhej. This intervention into the Lebanese literary scene, expanding its definition, should and no doubt will lead to more studies of this innovative form. Hayek mentions in passing other comics being produced in Lebanon, for example, the exciting contributions of the *Samandal* comics collective in Beirut (in which Merhej and Kerbaj participate). Other artists/writers are also receiving increased attention, for example, Leila Abdul Razzaq and her *Baddawi*, a memoir of her father's story of growing up in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, and French-language authors Zeina Abirached and Lamia Ziadé. These latter two are an interesting counterpoint to Alexandre Najjar as they position themselves politically and ideologically rather differently than he does, once again underlining the point about the diversity of French-language creative production in Lebanon.

*Beirut, Imagining the City* is an important contribution to scholarship for all of these reasons. While a serious literary study, it nonetheless addresses far larger questions and issues about Lebanese history, politics, and society, especially the role of Beirut. Hayek's study

analyzes some of the reasons that “Beirut is no longer for us” and studies like hers suggest ways to rethink how to make Beirut a place and space for its people.

Michelle Hartman  
Associate Professor, Arabic Literature  
Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University

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Citation Information

Hartman, Michelle, “*Beirut is no longer for us*”: *A Review Essay of Ghenwa Hayek’s Beirut, Imagining the City*, *SCTIW Review*, July 7, 2015. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/640>.

ISSN: 2374-9288