

# SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

August 18, 2015

*Interrupting Otherness:  
New Directions in Literary Studies by French Language Arab Writers*

Michelle Hartman, *Native Tongue, Stranger Talk: The Arabic and French Literary Landscapes of Lebanon*, Syracuse University Press, 2014, 368 pp. \$44.95 US (hbk), ISBN 9780815633563.

Michelle Hartman's *Native Tongue, Stranger Talk: The Arabic and French Literary Landscapes of Lebanon*<sup>1</sup> opens with a provocative question that deftly guides the author's extensive inquiry into the triangular dialectics of language, translation, and colonialist knowledge production: "can an Arab writer write Arabic in French?" More specifically, Hartman's book researches whether works written in a colonial language like French "can express the everyday realities lived in Arabic in Lebanon" (xii). Using a wide array of French-language texts by Lebanese women writers from Mandate to postwar Lebanon as her case studies, Hartman investigates the creative modalities by which these writers enfolded Arabic into their textual wor(l)ds without necessarily producing "otherness." This herein is her creative challenge to the colonial framework which such writers are normatively subject. Using instead an "anticolonial framework," Hartman seeks to disabuse her readers of the artificial boundaries between Arab/Arabic literary "traditions" and the so-called "worldliness" of the French language (x). Her main impetus for writing the book stems in part from her frustration with the "curious" status ascribed to French-language Arab writers. "It is rare to see novels by Lebanese writers of French considered contributions to Arab culture or literature," laments Hartman, namely because "their language of choice is not Arabic and they belong to a small privileged minority" (xi). Hartman's goal is thusly twofold: to re-interpolate French-Language Lebanese writers into the fold of Arabic literary production and to tease out the politics of language in their creative literary contexts. One of the book's larger projects is to draw attention to the poeticized and politicized participation of Arab women writers in larger debates about war and violence, women's role in society, class hierarchies, class and gender-based oppressions, and colonial languages.

*Native Tongue, Stranger Talk* is divided into three parts: "Part One: Gendered Interference," "Part Two: Arabic as Feminist Punctuation," and "Part Three: Writing as Translation," and it spans three key periods of Lebanese history: the French mandate and

---

<sup>1</sup> "Stranger Talk' is a metaphor used by anthropologists and linguists to describe the language with which members of an in-group may communicate with members of an out-group" (22).

early independence (1920-1943), the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), and the postwar period (1990-present). Each chapter includes guided readings of three novels in each time period; all the while tracing the strangely “new” native Arabic-French literary languages each text produces. Inspired by Etel Adnan’s observation that she is a “stranger and native to the...same mother tongue” (1), Hartman’s introduction derives its ethos from Adnan’s life story as a French-educated native elite who nevertheless wants to move beyond blaming the colonizers. Taking her cues from Adnan’s literary sensitivities, Hartman rails against accusations of “false consciousness” alluded to by Adnan and Nadia Tuéni, a label often pegged to French language writers at large who are regarded as pertaining to right-wing Christian nationalism or “mandate nostalgia.” Hartman buttresses her challenge by positing the complete opposite: that due to language affinities, French language Arab writers pose an even *greater* challenge to colonialism. She argues that literary studies *qua* literary studies can help us better probe a range of topics, genres and ideological inclinations that go beyond the stultifying category of “nation.”

*Native Tongue, Stranger Talk* rejects the paradigm of Hegelian modernity and the subject’s “free” embrace of the nation, which Hartman posits is always already implicated in a nationalist framework through its setting up of problematic boundaries between languages and cultures. Instead, the author prefers to disrupt the order of things such that “Arab/Islamic” would be somehow mixed into the putative worldliness of French. Hartman develops her argument by engaging world literature as a conceptual framework that moves beyond national and postcolonial frameworks. While she provides an overview of some of the prominent names in world literature today, she engages Franco Moretti’s, David Damrosch’s, Pascale Casanova’s, and Aamir Mufti’s critiques of world literature; she meditates mostly on Mufti’s question of the unequal power distribution between world literary texts. Despite the breadth and depth of world literary criticism today, she rightly notes the scant literary attention paid to Arabic language texts. Hartman’s book is one step in the direction of rectifying this balance. By exploring the interconnections between poetics and politics in French-language fiction from Lebanon in a world literature framework and how Arabic and French “interanimate” each other, Hartman reintegrates Arabic, albeit via French, into contemporary debates about world literature. The beauty of Hartman’s analysis is the way in which she teases out the many colorful strands of language into a chiaroscuro of nuances and shades that emerge with each close reading. The book proceeds by providing a comprehensive overview of the specific ways in which the author understands the term “language mixing” and the kinds of techniques and strategies that the works under study employ.

Hartman crafts an interesting theoretical apparatus: she brings together a Bakhtinian reading of the novel within a world literary framework to try to understand the languages of the novel “as flexible and changing” (55). Using Bakhtin’s notion of *polyglossia* defined as “the use of many languages together—the languages of generations, times, places, classes, genres, and all other sorts of languages” (14), she teases out the variegated Arabic voices that emerge in a dialogical rather than subservient relationship to the authorial voice of French in the novels under study. In this way, she disrupts our normative understanding of polyphony as merely “multiple voices,” but argues that they are in fact producers of social phenomena in their own rights that advance our understanding of hierarchies, gender roles, and religious differences, among other issues. Hence the question that is begged at the outset rings loud throughout the rest of the book: can the stranger native speak? Borrowing and expanding

upon the term “relexification” from Chantal Zabus’s *The African Palimpsest*<sup>2</sup> meaning to “indigenize” a foreign language (26), Hartman proposes that each of the nine novels analyzed in her book “use representations of the Arabic language—words and expressions identifiable as Arabic or meant to invoke it...as an aesthetic and formal strategy that has political implications and encodes political messages” (23).

Chapter One, “Gendered Interferences: French Expressions of Arabic in the Mandate and Early Independence Period,” furnishes the reader with the much needed historical backdrop to the works published during the period of the French Mandate over Lebanon (1932-1943) and its early independence (1943), as well as novels discussed in subsequent chapters. For example, it traces the contours of French exceptionalism in Lebanon, the favoring of Maronite Christian elites by the colonizers, in order to explain the literary formation of French-language writers and the internal turmoil that gripped some of them including the aforementioned Etel Adnan. Novels discussed in Part One include Amy Kher’s *Salma et son Village* (Salma and her village), Eveline Bustros’s *Sous la baguette du coudrier* (Under the divining rod), and finally Andrée Chedid’s *Le sommeil délivré* (From sleep unbound). The latter makes its way into Hartman’s more nuanced ethnographic readings of mandate Lebanon publications. She rescues the footnote from its elusive status by reintegrating it into the main body of Chedid’s text and activating its relationship to the reading process. Footnotes, according to Hartman, enhance the “ethnographic” element of a text by creating a “pact” between reader and writer; the authorial voice attains insider status by glossing over “exotic” words while simultaneously gauging its readership’s “horizon of expectations” (111). For instance, though *Le sommeil délivré* contains only six footnotes, five of which explain or translate Arabic words, they bare an active relationship to the text. Hartman cites the example of the translation of the Arabic word “sit” meaning “lady” to refer to the female protagonist, whose title simultaneously betrays her social class, an important layering to our understanding of Samya’s honorific title that comes with birth rather than toil as with her counterpart, Boutros.

Part Two, “Arabic as Feminist Punctuation,” continues to treat issues of gender roles and the position of women, but in the context of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) with supplemental commentaries on domestic violence, the rise of militias, civilians taking up arms and its deleterious effects on society. Chapter 5 traces the contours of what came to be known as “the Lebanese civil war novel” and follows a rather cursory selection of arguments by Edward Said and Elias Khoury on the conditions of literary production during the Lebanese civil war. The author does, however, make important mention of the rise of a “new” generation of writers who gained acclaim from and during the war such as Evelyne Accad, Dominique Ezzé, and Ezza Agha Malak (one of the few French-language writers from a Muslim background), as well as male writers Ramy Zein, Mansour Labaky, and Sélim Nassib.

While much has been written about the Lebanese civil war novel in relation to its inadvertent opening up of new horizons for women writers in both French and Arabic (critics Evelyne Accad, Samira Aghacy, Nuha Bayumi, Nazik Saba Yared, miriam cooke, and Lamia Shehadeh, among others have made much of this period) not many critics have dwelled so meticulously on the linguistic aspect of this civil war literature. Hartman’s contribution here is her Bakhtinian reading of *bayt* (which means “house” or “home” in Arabic) to mean “billingsgate,” the everyday and even vulgar language of the streets or

---

<sup>2</sup> Chantal Zabus, *The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel* (The Netherlands: Rodopi, 2007).

marketplace punctuating the texts under study. The argument here is that “high” French in these texts is harshly and deliberately undercut by vulgar Arabic words to disrupt the discourse with feminist subversions of the traditional *bayt* (or “house”) during times of cataclysmic violence. To animate this argument, Hartman shows how Vénus Khoury-Ghata’s *Le fils empaillé* (The son stuffed with straw) published in 1980 uses “franbanais” (expressions used only by French-speaking people in Lebanon) as a new textual language to produce “feminist commentary” also known as “gendered interferences” in the world of patriarchal violence and the war. One of the interesting examples she cites is how “franbanais” operates such that idiomatic Arabic is coopted into the text while also actively undermining or ridiculing the way French people “see” the indigenous other:

The respectable French person should betray no surprise on his face at the indigenous person’s habits and customs when the latter invites him to “let himself be seen,” meaning “come more often.” Or when he reproaches him for “whitening his face on his back” (“taking all the credit”), or when he advises him to “show how big his shoulders are,” or in other words, to go away. (Khoury-Ghata as quoted by Hartman on page 160)

The story then follows the breakdown of a family in 1950s Lebanon by drawing a metonymic line between patriarchal control of a family and the colonial grip of Mandate France over Lebanon. This is best encapsulated through the imagery of a domineering father beating his masturbating son for soiling his bed in the shape of “the map of France” (151). Set in the context of the civil war, it is the female narrator, Diane, who gives expression to this analogy as a way of meditating retrospectively on the disintegration of Lebanon.

Other texts examined in Part Two are Evelyne Accad’s *Coquelicot du massacre* (A poppy from the massacre) and Dominique Eddé’s *Lettre posthume* (A posthumous letter), which is an epistolary novel about a Lebanese priest who narrates stories about the war to a friend in France, both of which use direct explanations of transliterated “vulgar” Arabic words in French. Another interesting mobilization of Hartman’s understanding of “billingsgate” as a mode of analysis is the annotation of the Arabic curse word “kiss oukhtoum” (“your sister’s vagina”) as an example of anti-feminist male chauvinism.

Hartman starts off her third and last section with the apt observation that postwar Lebanese literature is a form of “exorcising demons” of the past. Insisting upon the persevering presence of French in the postwar literary scene despite the rise of English and the proliferation of Arabic fictional publications, she cites Elias Khoury’s prediction that “Francophone culture is no more” (231) in the postwar era as a foil to her own argument. She points to the difference in the circulation and receptivity of French language writers of Lebanese fiction (they received greater receptivity and circulation) as opposed to Arabic language writers who seem to be more inwardly oriented. While it is beyond the scope of her argument to expand upon Arabic language Lebanese fiction, she runs the risk of conflating their diversity by focusing narrowly on a selection of well-known names such as Elias Khoury and Rachid al-Daif as exemplars of this form of war literature.

Part Three expands the discourse on the novel to include a discussion of how “writing as translation” operates in three very distinct novels of Lebanon’s postwar period: Leïla Barakat’s first novel, *Sous les vignes du pays Druze* (Under the vines in the Druze country), which was published just after the war ended in 1993; Dominique Eddé’s second novel, which published six years later, *Pourquoi il fait si sombre?* (Why is it so dark?); and Eddé’s third novel, which appeared four years later in 2003, *Cerf-Volant* (Kite). In all three, Hartman

makes the argument that a polyphony of voices not only undermine or question the authorial voice, but actively override the standard literary French to make the text read—and here is where Hartman is at her best—as though it were “written as translation” (227). This is to say that *writing as translation* becomes a form of resistance against the coopting of less powerful languages (in this case, Arabic) into the fabric of the more powerful (French). An example of this form of resistant translation can be seen in Barakat’s novel, which is a forbidden love story about a Druze community nestled in the Chouf mountains—rarely are Druze fictional portraitures represented in French, as Hartman notes. Its unique status is furthered by the untranslated Arabic words that, not only dot, but flood the narrative, challenging and compounding the reading process for the non-Arabic reader. Hartman reads the obstinately untranslated idiomatic Arabic expressions as a form of resistance on the part of the author in protecting the Druze community from outsider gazes, as if daring and provoking those who wish to “know more” to learn more about this “other” language. To bring this home, she quotes the French narrator’s observation from Eddé’s novel in which the narrator comments on the untranslatability of Arabic and hence inaccessibility of the lives of those who inhabit it:

They speak Arabic and it is untranslatable—I know one (story) where they hardly speak at all, they make love in the shelter under the bombs, they never saw each other in the light of day, she is a seamstress and he is a waiter in a café [ils parlent en arabe et c’est intraduisible—j’en connais une où ils ne parlent presque pas, ils font l’amour dans l’abri sous les bombes, il ne sont jamais vus à la lumière du jour, elle est couturier et il est serveur dans un café] (272).

At the end of *Native Tongue, Stranger Talk* the reader understands that the experience of reading the novels handpicked by Hartman is the beginning of the answer to the question: can one write Arabic in French? The book is a *tour-de-force* about the creative modalities by which the works under study mount resistances to the colonial language through textured languages, producing new forms of understanding the so-called and heatedly contested title of “Francophone novel” outside of its normative colonial gaze.

Yasmine Khayyat  
Assistant Professor of Arabic Literature  
Rutgers University

© 2015: Yasmine Khayyat

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Khayyat, Yasmine, *Interrupting Otherness: New Directions in Literary Studies by French Language Arab Writers*, *SCTIW Review*, August 18, 2015. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/682>.

ISSN: 2374-9288