

## METAMORPHOSES

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### A WINDOW ON THE ARAB WORLD: THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSLATION

Over the centuries the Middle East has been a constant battleground for Western nations vying for control. There are innumerable diverse histories and travelogues written from an outsider's perspective, yet, until recently, we knew relatively little about the way of life in those countries. One reason for this, possibly, was the lack of published translations of Arabic fiction and autobiography. As Edith Grossman writes in *Why Translation Matters*:

Translation expands our ability to explore through literature the thoughts and feelings of people from another society or another time [...] it permits us [...] for a brief time to live outside our own skins, our own preconceptions and misconceptions.

To translate fiction requires more than the literal knowledge of a language. In the last fifty years there has been an explosion of translations of Arabic literature by a growing number of translators. My goal is to highlight some of the novels in translation that convey a picture of the way of life in the writer's home country. This bibliographical essay is primarily devoted to literature in translation, but from time to time where a novel or biography written originally in English seems particularly relevant it will be listed. Additionally, by naming the translators who have made these works available, and by quoting from some of their introductions I wish to acknowledge the importance of their work. I should perhaps add a disclaimer: this selective overview of work available in English translation can make no attempt to be comprehensive, given how many new translations are now--fortunately--being published.

**EGYPT** A break-through came in 1988 when Naguib Mafouz, an Egyptian, was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, the first writer in Arabic to receive that award. He went on to publish more than 50 novels, many short stories and film scripts. The formidable task of translating Mafouz' *Cairo Trilogy* was undertaken by William Hutchins. The Trilogy depicts the life of an Egyptian family from World War I to the 1950's.

Mafouz's sympathy with socialism and nationalism, and his wariness of Islamic extremism involved him in much political conflict, giving us a foretaste of the Arab Spring.

Since that time we have had the good fortune to read many Egyptian authors. *The Yacoubian Building* by Alaa Al Aswany resumes Mafouz's earlier theme of Egyptian life and continues it through the 1950's, providing the reader with a glimpse of a more tawdry Cairo, suffering under the smog and confusion of modern times. Aswany's explicit description of sexual encounters shocked his Egyptian readers, but he also writes with tenderness of the struggle for love. *The Yacoubian Building* was extremely popular both at home and abroad, and was made into a film. Humphrey Davies, the translator of *The Yacoubian Building* has also translated many other novels, such as Mafouz's *Thebes at War*, Khouri's *The Gate of the Sun* and *Yalo*. In each case he honors the distinctive tone and dialogue of these very different novels, illustrating the translator's need to live within each text, creating a fluent dialogue and an accurate physical setting.

A more recent account of Egyptian life can be found in *Zaat* by Sonallah Ibrahim. This novel includes many contemporary newspaper excerpts and portrays a modern-day Egypt with its corruption, scandals and new wealth. The translator, Anthony Calderbank, comments on the difficulty of such a translation: "I have tried to reproduce the dark humor and erotic tension that, though not always openly voiced, are ever present." Another novel that contains dark humor is *Jasmine* by Ibrahim Abdel Meguid (translated by Noha Radwan). Set in Alexandria it portrays not only the corruption of the Sadat era but also the boredom, passivity and bewilderment of the population that eventually will be transformed into the excitement and energy of the Arab Spring. Not to be ignored is another prolific writer of the period, Albert Cossery, sometimes called "the Voltaire of the Nile" Among his many novels, written primarily in French, is *A Splendid Conspiracy* ably translated by Alyson Waters.

With one exception the voices of Arab women, until recently, have been missing from this body of literature. That one exception, however, was that of an early feminist before the term was ever used: Huda Shaarawi who wrote *Harem Years* (translated by Margot Badran). Shaarawi's public unveiling at the railway station in Cairo was a significant act of defiance. The voices of Arab women available in translation have now become a rich addition. One woman in particular stands out because of her fearlessness in addressing the rights of women: Nawal El-Saadawi. A practicing medical doctor for many years, she is well known

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to the West as a courageous feminist who has fought for the social and intellectual freedom of women. Despite many death threats and frequent imprisonments, she has allowed nothing to daunt her fight against injustice in all forms. Her written work concentrates on the difficulties faced by women today in Egypt and in other similar countries: "Words should not seek to please, to hide the wounds in our bodies, or the shameful moments in our lives...they may hurt, give us pain, but they can also provoke us to question what we have accepted for thousands of years." Nawal has written too many books to list individually but of particular interest are her autobiographies *A Daughter of Isis* and *Walking Through Fire* both translated by her husband, Sherif Hetata. Of publications written originally in English Leila Ahmed's autobiographical *A Border Passage* should not be overlooked. For a completely up-to-date account of the Arab Spring *Cairo My City, Our Revolution* by the well-known journalist Ahdaf Soueif is essential.

IRAQ Many of the Iraqi authors who were writing before the Iraq invasion are now living elsewhere. One of the most famous is Fadhil al-Azzawi who was born in Kirkuk but has lived in Germany since 1977. In the *Last of the Angels*, translated by William M. Hutchins, Azzawi portrays life in a small town just prior to the end of the monarchy with humor but also with realism and an unusual mix of fantasy. This powerful novel follows the lives of three very different characters during the anti-communism years dominated by the British-run Iraq Petroleum Company. Another Iraqi novelist living in exile, Muhain al-Rakli, wrote about life in a village during the Saddam Hussein dictatorship. *Scattered Crumbs*, translated by Yasmeen Hanoosh, takes place during the Iran-Iraq war and portrays both supporters and opponents of Saddam. A series of short stories titled *The Madman of Freedom Square*, written by Hassan Blasim and translated by Jonathan Wright, also covers the period of the Iran-Iraq War and the years that follow. He writes with biting humor and realism of the experience of war and especially of the aftermath. One of Iraq's greatest writers was a Palestinian Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, a Christian who spent most of his life in Iraq after the Nakba. Jabra had a degree from Cambridge and studied at Harvard; his home became literally a cultural center in Baghdad until it was destroyed by bombs. He was also known for his translations, especially of the novels of Ghassan.

Another intriguing novel, *The Tobacco Keeper*, is written by a poet-journalist Ali Bader, and framed within a fictional journalist's mission to explore the murder of a Jewish Iraqi musician. The title references a

poem by the Portuguese poet Pessoa in which he talks of the assumption of three different personalities by a single person. Bader traces the life of the victim who assumes a different personality in three different countries: Iraq, Israel, Iran and then back to Iraq where he becomes the famous composer Kamal Medhat. He lives through the many revolutions, marries and has a son in each of the countries, but maintains a correspondence with his first wife. This fascinating novel is translated by Amira Nowaira.

**IRAN** Much of Iranian literature available to us prior to the current censorship was written in English. Writers like Nafisi (*Reading Lolita in Tehran*) and Ebadi (*Iran Awakening: One Woman's Journey to reclaim her life and country*) have been published extensively in the West. There have also been several novels by Iranians who have grown up in the U.S. such as Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad*. Of recent literature available in translation, one book comes to mind, *Things We Have left Behind* by Zoya Pirzad, an Armenian Iranian. This is a simple story of family life in the city of Abadan where life centers on the oil refinery and where there is a large Armenian community that commemorates every year the anniversary of the Armenian massacre of the last century. The novel takes place in the spring of 1962. Religious differences are not emphasized but clearly Armenian Christian customs and festivals are adhered to. The same daily concerns and conflicts familiar to American families form the backbone of this novel with one difference, the pervading atmosphere of hierarchy. The higher the husband's grade in the oil refinery the better the house and the area where they are encouraged to live. It is also clear that this story is taking place prior to the restrictions of veiling. Women are free to go anywhere, have jobs and are outspoken, though marriage is still a priority for them. Family life is emphasized and food is the center of their gatherings. For readers who like to cook there is mention of various Armenian meals. Many English terms dating from the days of British ownership of the oil refinery are inserted in conversations. Armenians in Iran use Persian (or Farsi) in general communication but Armenian within their own communities. This novel provides a rare glimpse of life in towns other than Tehran.

Insight into life first under the Shah and then under the ayatollahs can be found in Mahmoud Dowlatabadi's *The Colonel*. An Amazon reviewer describes it as a book that must be read "to understand the extreme traumas that the Iranian people have suffered."

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In current political reports of the uprisings in the Middle East religion appears frequently as a basic cause of dispute, yet in reading so many of these novels covering roughly a 50-year period religion, though mentioned, is rarely the main cause of friction. Many writers talk about neighbors who are Christians, Moslems or Jews but it is not a focus of their work. The characters in so much of this literature are struggling with the rapid societal changes brought about by reaction to the West rather than religious controversies.

**KURDISH LITERATURE** Despite the frequent appearance of the Kurds in current political discussions, very little of Kurdish life has come to us through literature. It was therefore with great pleasure that I came across *My Father's Paradise* by Ariel Saba. This account is written in English but is included for its insight into Kurdish life and tradition.

Ariel Saba is a Kurd who grew up in Los Angeles and writes a loving memoir of his father, a Professor of Aramaic Language at UCLA who grew up in the very old village of Zakho in Northern Iraq, just south of the Turkish border. Zakho is one of the few places in today's world where people still speak Aramaic, a language that dates from the second millennium BC. In Zakho Jews, Christians and Muslims lived at peace with one another, enjoying each other's festivities. [Religion was not a divide]. But in the 1940's when Israel put out the call to Jews of all nationalities to return to the homeland, the Saba family left Zakho and made their way to Israel only to find themselves stigmatized as non-Westerners so they emigrated to the US. Ariel Saba went on a pilgrimage to learn about his family roots. The result is *My Father's Paradise*, a description of his father's amazing journey from Zakho to UCLA.

*Memed, My Hawk* by Yashar Kemal offers a very different perspective. We are indebted to Edouard Robiti for his 1981 translation from the Turkish. Yashar Kemal grew up in Southern Turkey where he says "many bandits roamed the Taurus Mountains and when I was a child I met some of them." Within his family he spoke Kurdish, but in the village he spoke Turkish. Kemal narrates the life of Kurdish families and their struggle for existence. He imbues his character, Memed, with determination and a spirit of adventure, a hero around whom myths might be written. Kemal captivates us with his passion for this mountainous country and the people who inhabit it. We are shown the market where "in one corner a man was sitting on a big stump beating out a horseshoe and singing to the rhythm of his work. This was the famous "Blind Haji". We are transported to a far removed part of the world, with its myths and

traditions. *Memed* is Kemal's first novel and won him the Varlik Prize for the best novel of the year.

**LEBANON** Many Lebanese novels were written originally in English, possibly thanks to the presence of the American University of Beirut. In this article, however, I concentrate on the novels in translation that take us to the heart of the civil war. We gain insight into the chaotic conditions of a country beset by violence, torn apart by factions, and within just a few decades bridging the gap between tradition and modernity. Many of the novels are written by women, and reveal the stress and conflict brought about by cultural change. Although strikingly different from each other, they all tell a story against a background of a changing society and the chaos and confusion caused by war, presenting a considerable challenge to translators. Fadia Faqir mentions this in her introduction to Hoda Barakat's first novel *The Stone of Laughter*:

this delicate balancing act entails being faithful to the spirit of the Arabic text and to its perceived English-speaking audience. The translator becomes something like a double agent, with a sense of split loyalty...

Sophie Bennett in her translation of *The Stone of Laughter* has succeeded in meeting this challenge. This very popular novel won the Al Naqid Literary Prize for First Novels. Barakat portrays the struggles of a gay man in a divided and besieged Beirut, where people spend their daily energy on staying alive, maintaining contact, finding food amid dust and destruction. The protagonist, Khalil, is not only confused about his sexual life but about the entire political and social situation. He tries to remain immune but inevitably is drawn into the morass.

Another very popular first novel *Bas In Beirut* written by Iman Humaydan Younes has been translated into French and German in addition to the English translation by Max Weiss. Younes describes the lives of four women, trapped by warfare and separated from families and loved ones. During the Lebanese civil war they struggle to come to terms with their altered existence, longing for stability in a rapidly changing society that jolts them out of their traditional lives and separates them from their families. Younes' second novel *Wild Mulberries* (translated by Michelle Hartman) takes place at an earlier time in a village in the mountains of Lebanon. It too conveys the restlessness of the times. The pattern of life is clearly changing, old customs are fading, young people long to leave

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for the city. *Wild Mulberries* is a coming of age novel that illustrates the growing independence of women and their desire for something more than the old village life.

That change in women's independence and the clash with modernity is strikingly apparent in an even more contemporary novel by Alexandra Chreiteh titled *Always Coca-Cola*. It might well be classified as chick-lit were it not for the very serious underlying vein. The gap between the traditional life portrayed in *Wild Mulberries* and that of the three young women in their early twenties in Chreiteh's novel covers the rapid changes in society that took much longer to develop in the West. Chreiteh's explicit descriptions of the life of these three young women in *Always Coca-Cola* must have shocked her many Arab readers. Humorous episodes contrast sharply with their harsh sexual experiences as these young women try to find their place in the changing culture. The three close friends are very different from each other: Yana - a model from Romania who appears on large billboards advertising Coca Cola; Yasmine - masculine in her interests, uninterested in make-up and fashion, and thought to be a lesbian; and Abeer, our narrator, who tries to steer a careful path between her very traditional family and her friends. *Always Coca Cola* is very much a first novel without the depth of many of the others mentioned yet it, too, portrays the lives of youth in war-torn Beirut. Michelle Hartman, the translator, in an interesting *Afterword* writes of the difficulty of conveying the sense of the narrative:

From the title itself—a marketing slogan for Coca-Cola, perhaps the ultimate expression of globalization—to the characters' preferred café, Starbucks, to their conversations about boys and sex, dating and marriage, tampons and gender roles, this novel resonates with the current issues and concerns of young women and men all around the world.

**PALESTINE** Perhaps most difficult of all to write about is the literature of Palestine, since so many Palestinians are scattered across the diaspora, and frequently write in various languages, especially English. Sari Nusszeibeh's autobiography *Once upon a Country* provides a useful background to these novels. He comes from a very old Palestinian family, many of whom played an important role in the recent tumultuous years. Also written in English Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* gives a moving account of life in the refugee camps, the setting for many Palestinian

novels. Their starting point is the Nakba of 1948 when Palestinians were uprooted and thereafter never allowed to return to their homes. *Gate of the Sun* written by Elias Khoury (translated by Humphrey Davies) is the epic novel of the lives of Palestinians in exile. Upon its English publication in 1998 it was nominated by many newspapers as the best book of the year. Khoury writes a searing account of the loss and suffering of Palestinians brought about by the Nakba.

Episodes of this history appear in many different accounts. Yahya Yakhlif, the author of *A Lake Beyond the Wind* (translated by May Jayyusi and Christopher Tingley) describes the 1948 destruction of the lives of people in his hometown Samakh. Yakhlif remained a refugee for most of his life and conveys vividly the havoc created in that memorable year. Similarly Salwa Salem in *The Wind In My Hair* (translated by Yvonne Freccero) writes of her childhood memories of fleeing from Jaffa after which she and her entire family remained refugees scattered across the diaspora. *The End of Spring* by Sahar Khalifeh (translated by Paula Haydar) is a coming-of-age novel enacted in the years leading up to the spring of 2002 and the siege of President Arafat's compound. Again it describes the chaotic life in the West Bank in those years. *The Attack* by Yasmina Khadra (translated from the French by John Cullen) narrates the experiences of young people during the siege of Arafat's compound. Two very different books, one in English and one in translation, describe the experiences of young children growing up in these troubled years. *Touch* written by Adania Shibli (also translated by Paula Haydar) contains a young Palestinian girl's observations on life. In *Tasting the Sky* Ibtisam Barakat, writing in English, shares her memories of becoming separated from her family when they were fleeing in the six-day war.

Perhaps the most well-known Palestinian author of the time was Ghassan Kanafani. His family were forced to leave Palestine and moved first to Beirut and then Damascus where Kanafani went to school. He then taught in Kuwait and finally returned to Lebanon where he worked for the PFLP and finally was killed in 1972. His major work, *Men in the Sun* (translated by Hilary Kilpatrick), follows the lives of three men who are trying to reach the Gulf where they hope to find a job in the booming oil industry. Their efforts were not supported by their fellow Arabs from surrounding countries. Kanafani went on to write many short stories, one of the most interesting being *All That's Left to you* (translated by May Jayyusi and Jeremy Reed) in which a brother and sister living in Gaza recall their family and their losses..

Of the many Palestinian novels and biographies written in



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English there are several that must be mentioned. Possibly the most well-known is *The Lemon Tree* by Sandy Tolán, a very human story that involves two families, one Palestinian driven from their house in Palestine the other, a Bulgarian Jewish family, seeking refuge in that house on their return to the homeland of Israel. Also in English is Raja Shehadeh's *Strangers in the House*, which describes the difficult life of an Israeli-Palestinian who tries to continue as a lawyer, seeking a solution to the conflict. Most memorable of all is *I Shall Not Hate* by Izzeldin Abuelaish, a Palestinian doctor who lived in Gaza and worked in an Israeli hospital. His daughters were killed and his home destroyed by Israeli rockets. After his wife died of cancer he moved with his remaining children to Canada. His extraordinary response to the tragedy is to hope that it should be "the last sacrifice on the road to peace between Palestinians and Israelis."

**SYRIA** As civil war continues in Syria, access to Syrian writers becomes ever more important. Ulfat Idilbi's *Sabriya* takes us back to life in Damascus in the 1920's, fluidly translated by Peter Clark. Idilbi depicts the struggle of young people fighting for independence from a foreign power against the background of a society that is still largely patriarchal. The heroine, Sabriya, is constrained by her duty to her parents from following her own desire for an independent life, fueled by her growing feminism and awareness of the nationalist cause. Caught in the terror and violence around her, she is frustrated by the restrictions that prevent her from joining her brother and friend as an active participant in the struggle for freedom. Her desire to live according to her own conscience is in direct conflict with the wishes of her family and leads to disaster. We gain a realistic picture of Damascus a century ago from the lives of these young people, including many of the factors that undoubtedly contributed to the present upheaval.

Hanna Mina's semi-biographical novel *Fragments of Memory: A Story of a Syrian Family* (translated by Olive Kenny and Lorne Kenny) describes a very different segment of society. In realistic detail he narrates the life of a very poor family forced to move from city to country, as they struggle to eke out a bare existence. The collapse of the silk industry in Syria marks the breakdown of rural life, with moments that seem almost feudal in atmosphere. Mina is one of the most well-known writers in Syria, winning the Uwais Award in 1990. In *Fragments of Memory* there is none of the hope expressed in *Sabriya* for a better, freer life. In startling contrast to Hanna Mina's realism, Fadi Azzam takes us into

a world of fantasy and imagination in his novel *Sarmada* translated by Adam Talib. An element of mystery is introduced immediately in the first pages of the novel. A chance acquaintance tells the narrator that she once lived under a different name in his hometown Sarmada. She was the victim of a murder killing and has come back to life under a different name. Our narrator returns to Sarmada, a Druze village in the hills some distance from Damascus, to try to learn the truth. His efforts lead to more and more stories from the past, focusing on family passions and sex, humor and horror, amid an atmosphere of magic far removed from political events. Elayne Clift comments that “history and religion provide a subtext for many of the tales. They allow us to understand why some of the characters behave as they do.” She goes on to say that it enables Azzam “to address the current political climate...and western context in a way that is almost chilling.”

**THE MAGHREB** Over the last century a rich body of literature has emerged from the Maghreb covering the passage from colonialism to independence. Many of the writers from the area wrote in French so that translations come to us from both French and Arabic.

**ALGERIA** Our review of literature from the Mahgreb brings us to the fertile soil of Algeria and the work of a very famous feminist and prolific writer, Assia Djébar. Of Berber descent, she grew up in an Algerian village where her father taught French. She became the first Algerian woman to be accepted at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. Writing in French, she throws light on the lives of women who become radicalized by the continuing conflict in their lives. She allows us to see how in times of such stress women by necessity, and largely by desire, are drawn into independence and action, both inconceivable a few decades earlier. In an interesting passage in *Children of the New World* (translated from the French by Marjolijn de Jager) Djébar focuses on the word act:

The custom of having that behavior be intended only for a man, the husband, the father, or the brother, of being able to glimpse the thousand incidents in life only through the shelter of his authority, through the mirror of his judgment. It is a new word to which fate is pushing her.

In addition to *Children of the New World*, possibly Djébar’s best known

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novel is *A Sister to Scheherazade*.

One of the most prolific Algerian writers is Mohammed Dib. Expelled from Algeria for his support of independence he was allowed to remain in France where he wrote his many novels. The *Algerian Trilogy* (possibly only available in French) is a series of novels about an Algerian family from World War II to the revolution and later. Another Algerian writer who remained in Algeria but wrote in French was Mouloud Feraoun, who was assassinated in 1962. The earliest of his many novels is *The Poor Man's Son* (translated by Carol F. Coates), a semi-autobiography portraying the poverty of peasant life. Finally there is a grim and gripping novel *Abduction* written by Anouar Benmalek and published in 2011. His disturbing story of the abduction of a young girl was inspired by actual events. Simon Pare provides a fluid translation.

**LIBYA** Libyan authors are finally enjoying their release from their fear under the Qadhafi regime. Hisham Matar admits that he wrote his two novels *Anatomy of a Disappearance* and *In The Country of Men* very carefully under Qadafi's shadow. Ghazy Gheblawy, one of Libya's major voices writes "Learning how to talk and write publicly in code became a vital skill to avoid persecution, not only of yourself but your family and friends." The well-known Libyan writer Ibrahim al-Kony, given the difficulty of writing about the contemporary world, turned to fables and the clash between man and animals. *The Bleeding of the Stone* (translated by May Jayyusi and Christopher Tingley) is a fascinating story of an encounter between a goatherd living in the remote desert and foreigners who want him to help them find a mythical animal, the *waddan*. The author writes a lyrical description of a gazelle. "How beautiful their shape is, their bodies so graceful, so smooth. Magic overflows from their eyes. They're the loveliest creatures in the world." Al-Kony clearly feels a connection with wild life, as do other Libyans who also write about the interaction between men and animals. Ahmed Fagih frequently uses animals in his stories as in *Desert Rats* (translated by Sorayya Allam and Chris Tingley).

**MOROCCO** Turning to Morocco we find another group of fascinating translations. Mohamed Berrada, one of the founders of the Union of Moroccan Writers and Professor of Arabic Literature, is a leader among contemporary Moroccan writers. *Game of Forgetting* is his first, partly autobiographical novel that became a best-seller in the Arab world. In his introduction the translator, Issa J. Boullata, talks of Berrada's life and

discusses his literary theories: "The novel is not merely the technique of constructing a plot but ultimately an embodiment of the dialogue between the self, seeking knowledge, and the external world." Berrada himself, in the novel, speaks of the power of memory: "Will memory defeat the game of forgetting? We continue to water a dying tree, though we are unsure that it will live." This novel is set in the last years of the French protectorate and the early years of independence. Another popular Moroccan novel is Tahar Ben Jelloun's *leaving tangier* (translated from French by Linda Coverdale) which tells a story, familiar to many in the region, of leaving home for Spain only to experience deception and disappointment. His second novel *This Blinding Absence of Light* (again translated by Coverdale) won the international Impac prize. Mohamed Choukri, who died in 2003, like so many other Moroccan writers grew up in extreme poverty. He fled to Tangier where he met many famous writers including Paul Bowles who translated some of his novels. One of them, *For Bread Alone*, was a great success when it was published in English but banned for many years in Morocco for its explicit description of sexual experiences. Paul Bowles in his introduction speaks of the challenge he faced in translating:

*For Bread Alone* is a manuscript, written in classical Arabic, a language I do not know. The author had to reduce it first to Moroccan Arabic for me. Then we used Spanish and French for ascertaining shades of meaning. Although exact, the translation is far from literal.

Leila Abouzeid, one of the first Moroccan woman writers to be translated into English, is also one of the few who write in Arabic rather than French. Her first book *Year of the Elephant, short stories* (translated by Barbara Parmenter) addresses the conflict between tradition and modernity, and women's struggle for independence against a background of civil war. Another well-known woman writer Fatima Mernissi wrote an autobiography entitled *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (translated by Ruth B. Ward). This book is reminiscent of Al Ashaarawi's *Harem Years* but covers a later period than her Egyptian predecessor. Mernissi also writes of confusion in a changing society.

**SUDAN** Each new revolution or civil war in this part of the world is accompanied by a rich outgrowth of literature. One author in particular,

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Tayeb Salih, has attracted much attention with his *Season of Migration to the North* (translated by Denys Johnson-Davies). In her introduction to Salih's book Laila Lalami writes

It is quite rare for an Arabic book to have had such a happy life in translation. The vast majority of Arabic fiction remains untranslated and unavailable to world audiences. A decade ago, Edward Said described his attempts to interest a New York publisher in the work of Naguib Mahfouz...Said's suggestions were met with a string of refusals.

A review in *The New York Times* describes Salih's book thus: "Swift and astonishing in its prose, this novel is more instructive than any number of academic books." The two main characters have each spent time in London. Salih explores the impact of colonialism on their lives and their necessary accommodations. In his second book *The Wedding of Zein and other Stories* (made into the film *A Handful of Dates*) Salih depicts village life with both humor and awareness. His discerning eye helps us to understand the tremendous differences in our worlds.

**TUNISIA** Much of Tunisian literature is written in French. Possibly the most well-known writer is Albert Memmi whose semi-autobiographical novel *The Pillar of Salt* was translated by Edouard Roditi. Memmi describes what it was like growing up as an Algerian Jew (with a Berber mother) on the edge of a ghetto in colonial Tunis. This is an important book for its portrayal of a young man's struggle to break out of his environment, reject the beliefs of his family, resist racial prejudice, and find an identity for himself despite educational and class barriers. This account is painful and depressing as the protagonist strives to find his place in the world. The same familiar themes of exile and confusion that we have seen in the works of other writers of the region are to be found among Tunisian francophone novelists in the post-colonial world such as Abdelwahab Meddeb who wrote *Malady of Islam* (translated by Pierre Jores and Ann Reid). Another woman author, Mustapha Tlili, writes poetically of life under French occupation in Lion Mountain. Unfortunately I have not been able to identify the translator even though the translation was described as "skillful...delicate and evocative language". Translators' roles are so important to us in understanding literature of other countries yet so rarely mentioned. The short story collection of Houyem Ferchichi

*The Scene and the Shadow* is another work for which I have been unable to identify the translator. Her work often appears in Arab and Tunisian journals and magazines.

**MIDDLE EAST LITERATURE IN GENERAL** A number of novels are set in the oil countries of the Mideast without specific identification of the country. One such is Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (translated by Peter Theroux). This long (600 pages) novel introduces the environment and concerns of Arab workers as they interact with the employees of the American oil companies. For knowledge of the life of women in the Mideast Hanan al-Shaykh immediately comes to mind. Her first novel *The Story of Zabra* was banned in some Middle Eastern countries because of her discussion of women's sexuality. Her second novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh* (translated by Catherine Cobham) follows the lives of four women in different settings each of whom is frustrated by her lack of freedom. She made the following comment on the women in these two books in an interview with Christiane Schlote in *Literary London Journal* September 2003:

Like in *The Story of Zabra* and especially like in *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, women thought that in order to attain freedom, they had to obtain it through their bodies. Because they knew that the ultimate taboo was sex in their country. And they were playing games and thinking that by going to practise sex, in a way they are defying men, and they are fighting men in a way and winning. But, of course, they didn't win anything by doing that because they stayed in the desert. And they did things against their spirits, against their personalities.

There are many more Middle Eastern novels in the pipeline, in the process of being translated or published, too many to list here. Both Interlink Books and the American University of Cairo Press are important sources for these publications. Also not included in this article are the many volumes of Arabic poetry finally available in translation: a rich reservoir for future research.

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