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RAFIK SCHAMI. *THE DARK SIDE OF LOVE*. TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY ANTHEA BELL. NORTHAMPTON, MA: INTERLINK BOOKS, 2009. 853 pp.

Rafik Schami's *The Dark Side of Love* is many things: a love story, a mystery, a memoir, a chronicle of life in a small Syrian town, an ode to Damascus, a study of the Syrian Christian community, and a sprawling history of Syria in the twentieth century. The novel spans several decades, following multiple generations of two rival clans--the Shahins and the Mushtaks--against a background of constant political upheaval. Schami's work is fast-paced and full of intrigue, both personal and national, making it a riveting page-turner. While Schami thinly disguises historical figures here with fictional names ("Satlan" for "Nasser," for example), he carefully explains the historical and political background to the uninitiated.

Schami's writing is strongest in the first part of the book focusing on Mala, the small, predominantly Christian village in which the feud between Shahins and Mushtaks has its roots. Mala is peopled with characters, each one more colorful than the last. The patriarch of the Mushtak clan and the founder of the family empire, George Mushtak, comes vividly to life in those early pages. But he is not the only inhabitant of Mala to do so, for many of the secondary characters belonging to this portion of the book are especially appealing.

That the chapters on Mala are so compelling is both a strength and a weakness of the work as a whole. Indeed, nothing that follows equals the vibrancy of those early passages. Damascus seems particularly drab in comparison with the small Christian village, and the metropolis never grabs the reader's imagination in the same way that Mala does. Nor is this blandness restricted to the setting of the latter half of the novel. Just as the description of Damascus pales in comparison with that of Mala, so are Farid Mushtak and Rana Shahin, the novel's main char-

acters, weak reflections of the book's other pair of lovers, George and Sarka Mushtak. Rana Shahin is especially difficult to grasp as a character. Feisty as a young girl, she loses most of her spunk and becomes increasingly dependent on her lover as the story unfolds. At times, her complete lack of autonomy makes it hard to empathize with Rana, particularly when trying to understand why she stays with her husband, a man whom she is forced to marry and who rapes her repeatedly.

The lackluster quality of the novel's main characters is not the only flaw to mar Schami's book. Throughout the novel--including the passages on Mala--Schami shows a marked proclivity for hackneyed explanations and cliché images, many drawn from the deep well of Orientalist fantasy, e.g. men who are "braver than a lion" or the lover for whom every meeting with his beloved "was an oasis in the desert of his loneliness." And what are we to make of the country boy Elias Mushtak, Farid's father, who discovers his own sexuality from watching two donkeys mate? Such obedience to preconceptions and perhaps prejudices is also evident in Schami's use of language.

British reviews of this novel were ecstatic. In the *Guardian*, the novelist and commentator Robin Yassin called it "the first great Syrian novel." Simon Louvish in the Independent went even further: "At last, the Great Arab Novel -- appearing without ifs, buts, equivocations, metaphorical camouflage or hidden meanings." All the more surprising then to realize that Schami in fact writes not in Arabic, but in German and that he has lived in Germany since 1971. His many books have been bestsellers there and they have earned the highest praise (e.g. "comparable to Thomas Mann"), and he is considered one of the most important of the so-called "migrant" authors. The grand arbiter of German literary taste, Fritz Raddatz of the highbrow German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, enthusiastically wrote in 2004 of the original German version of *The Dark Side of Love* that the reader "will experience a Scheherazade in dazzling color" in this "magic carpet" of a book that is teeming with "revenge, tribal feuds, and family conflict." Raddatz's choice of words reveals perhaps too clearly what some Germans find so compelling about Schami's

books, namely comfortably exotic tales of the Middle East. Another review spoke of “an Oriental Romeo and Juliet.” Given the current German debates about immigrants and Islam, one is uncertain how the confessional rivalries and mutual hatreds that Schami depicts would be understood by a German audience (or British or American, for that matter), but the book’s chief villains are Christians or the very secular agents of the state.

If Anthea Bell’s translation sometimes seems dry and flat, that is in fact a compliment to her fidelity to the original German style, which reads like a traditional, but not very graceful 19th-century novel. The novel’s German background occasionally reveals itself in proper names, e.g. “Jusuf” and not “Yusuf” or “Schams” not “Shams.”

KATWIWA MULE

NAWAL EL SAADAWI. *THE NOVEL*. TRANSLATED FROM THE ARABIC BY OMNIA AMIN AND RICK LONDON. Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2009. 236 pp. ISBN 978-1-56656-732-9. Paper: \$15.00

“What does writing mean? This question turned around and around in the young woman’s head as she tried to sleep.” (*The Novel*, 50)

Inarguably, Nawal el Saadawi’s novel is a complex exploration of this very question, as well as several others. It is an exploration of the relationship between writing, selfhood, and politics, both in their domestic articulations (which is to say local conditions in Egypt), and in the larger Arab world and the global arena. *The Novel* does not have an easily recognizable plot; rather it is a novel in which the lives of the main characters (Roustum, his wife Carmen, his friend Samih, the young aspiring female novelist who is the lover of both men, and their extended circle of friends—in particular Gamalat) are deeply entangled with those of the characters in the juvenilia by the budding female writer and in the posthumously published best-seller by the more established writer, Roustum’s wife Carmen. *The Novel* is a novel about novels.

Saadawi’s *The Novel*, like that of her nameless protagonist, opens with a puzzlingly nameless neophyte female writer introduced as follows: “twenty-three years old. Her father, unknown [. . .] no family, no university degree, no national identity card” (1). Both Saadawi and her fictional writer-character immediately establish the act of writing as an act of self-creation. The act of writing oneself into being is a central motif in the novel: “her life became her first novel” (1). If this act of fictional self-referentiality immediately signals the metafictional quality of Saadawi’s novel, other elements suggest this as well, especially the lack of a central protagonist or a clearly discern-