

The World Humanities Report

The Contemporary in Arabic Literature

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The Contemporary in Arabic Literature

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The notion of the contemporary in Arabic literature is both ubiquitous and charged. It is a temporal classifier that has evolved to mean anything from recent, apolitical, neoliberal, experimental to fluff. Often it is described as the problem child of the modern, its temporal predecessor that has defined the literary, particularly the aesthetics/politics nexus in the twentieth century. This essay probes the notion of the contemporary in Arabic literature by examining works that exemplify how literature since the 1990s has revisited canonical modern tropes such as political commitment (*iltizām*), secular nationalism, and exile and thereby redefined not only what constitutes the political but also what makes the literary in the contemporary era.¹

The Elusive Contemporary

Demarcating the contemporary era is an arduous task because of the difficulty in historicizing an era that has not yet passed, one that we inhabit and yet cannot identify or grasp. I address this impasse by thinking of the contemporary era relationally, not just by relying on temporal markers—despite their significance—but also by returning to the remainder of the literary modern that contemporary literature transgresses and considers past. In other words, the more we delineate what has constituted the literary modern, the more able we are to point to all the ways the contemporary era poses and answers differently the questions that have animated it.

The contemporary is not exclusively marked by aesthetics but by an emerging sensibility that speaks from and of the ruins of the modernist worldviews that have framed modern Arabic literature. To that end, I suggest a return to exile, secular nationalism, and political commitment—which I argue are foundational modernist tropes in Arabic literature. In light of consecutive experiences of loss, beginning with the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90) and continuing with the

¹ For a concept history of *iltizām* and the mid-century debates about literature of commitment, see Verena Klemm, “Different Notions of Commitment (Iltizam) and Committed Literature (Al-Adab al-Multazim) in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq,” *Arabic & Middle Eastern Literature* 3, no. 1 (2000): 51–62.

Oslo Accords (1993), notions pertaining to political commitment as a literary ethos, exile as a catalyst for change, and secular nationalism as an ideology of emancipation have lost their critical vigor and become symptomatic of a defunct political discourse and the locus of contemporary dissent.

If the past had been merely a set of unfulfilled promises and the future a temporality that will hardly materialize, this essay asks about how writers experience the present. It shows how the contemporary era is not a transitional state, or an interstitial time between an experience of tragedy and a future and fertile with possibilities.² Instead, the contemporary is a juncture in which time has become suspended and in which subjects are abandoned. The post-1990s Arab experience colors the tragedy of the collective sentiment of loss as it reveals itself in fiction and poetry that best illustrates the contemporary era.

An Aftermath of Loss

I approach the contemporary Arab moment as a collective experience of history and time defined along the parameter of consecutive “posts.” If the end of the Cold War engendered collective skepticism over the viability of Marxism, the end of the Gulf War and the dismemberment of the Palestinian resistance indicated the demise of a unified pan-Arab position toward Iraq and the question of Palestine: postwar Lebanon (1990), post-Gulf War (1991), and post-Oslo Accords (1993).³

Postwar Lebanon ushered in a new understanding of the role of the writer. The Lebanese Civil War erupted in 1975 after years of mobilization, ideological then military, around questions that had preoccupied postindependence writers and thinkers: how to conceive of a Lebanese modernity, one that is reconciled with its Arab heritage, while remaining cautious of premodern and sectarian structures of allegiance. Along this line of inquiry, consecutive generations of thinkers, whose political consciousness crystallized in the 1960s, found in Arab nationalism, Marxism, the Palestinian liberation struggle—or the intersection of these—hope for a future liberated from structural modes of economic and political oppression. They steered their vision away from the question of culture

² Edward Said writes about how after 1948 Arabs began writing the Palestinian present as a means to counter the threat of eradication and oblivion. Edward W. Said, “Arabic Prose and Prose Fiction after 1948,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 41–60.

³ For an extensive study on the depiction of politically committed intellectuals in contemporary fiction, see Zeina G. Halabi, *The Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual: Prophecy, Exile, and the Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

by embracing materialist readings of sectarianism and looked at nationalism, Arab and Palestinian, as a unifying ethos. Engulfing all and sparing none, the civil war mutated from a ideologically rationalized conflict into one driven by brute sectarianism that ultimately rearranged and neutralized ideological fault lines. Consequently, Lebanese militant intellectuals-turned-novelists, who had once espoused a nationalist and/or Marxist discourse of emancipation, faced two losses. First was the loss of the nationalist and Marxist ideological prospect and the realization of its futility and permeability to the sectarian order; the second was the loss of their own voices as catalysts for change and emancipation.⁴

With the suspension of conflict in 1990, Lebanese intellectuals turned their gaze inward to their wounded self-image. It was a moment of introspection, of looking at what caused this abysmal loss of the self, and collective doubt. As an epistemological notion, culture had been sidelined in the 1960s in favor of a materialist positivist reading of history, and here it returned in full force as the war unraveled and became a subject of inquiry in the 1990s.⁵ The question became, then, what is it *in culture* that allows such descent to sectarian violence and resistance to change.

Novelist Rashid al-Daif joined other postwar writers who revisited their respective sectarian, tribal, and regional ties, this time not as critics and rebels but as disenchanting subjects.⁶ Al-Daif's novels and protagonists best articulate an overarching anxiety about the fractured Lebanese modernity: they are middle-aged intellectuals overpowered by multiple setbacks that drive them to abandon their previous unqualified attachments to crude modernism in favor of ascribed

⁴ The question of intellectual disenchantment among postwar intellectuals and writers has been the subject of many studies. On the trumped prospect for modernity in literature, see Samira Aghacy, "Contemporary Lebanese Fiction: Modernization without Modernity," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 4 (2006): 561–80. On the attempt to salvage humanism from the ruins of ideology, see Ken Seigneurie, *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

⁵ Fadi A. Bardawil examines this collective introspection, particularly in the works of Yassin al-Hafez and Sadek Jalal al-Azm, beginning in 1967. See Fadi A. Bardawil, "The Inward Turn and Its Vicissitudes: Culture, Society, and Politics in Post-1967 Arab Leftist Critiques," in *Local Politics and Contemporary Transformations in the Arab World*, ed. Malika Bouziane, Cilja Harders, and Anja Hoffmann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 91–109.

⁶ Al-Daif speaks extensively about this *prise de conscience* as it materializes in his positioning in the literary field and his understanding of the mission of the postwar writer. See Hussein Bin Hamza, "Rashid Al-Daif: Al-Adab Laysa Mihnati" [Rashid Al-Daif: Literature is not my profession!], *Al-Akhbar*, November 7, 2006, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/156971>; "Al-Riwa'i Rashid al-Daif, Dayf Shabab al-Safir" [The novelist Rashid Al-Daif hosted by Shabab al-Safir], *al-Safir*, October 31, 2012; and Yusri al-Amir and Rashid Al-Daif, "Hiwar ma' Rashid al-Daif: 'An al-Khawf wa-l-Bawh wa Inhiyar al-Siyasa [An interview with Rashid Al-Daif: Fear, revelation, and the collapse of politics]", *al-Adab*, 1999.

structures of identification and modes of expression. Three works exemplify this reflexive turn: In *Dear Mr. Kawabata*, al-Daif stages a dramatic moment

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of disillusionment with the modernist discourse of militant Marxism that a generation of Lebanese intellectuals had embraced; later, in *Who's Afraid of Meryl Streep?*, he fleshes out the subsequent moment of regression to a premodern

state of primordial attachments. More recently, in *Tablit al-Bahr (Paving the Sea)*, al-Daif imagines the first stage of this tripartite trajectory: the genesis of the modern intellectual, the original moment of radical self-fashioning that dictates a severe rupture with tradition, and an embrace of the modern.⁷ From the failed prospect of revolution emerged a contemporary sensibility that looks at the ordinary and the traditional as tools for conducting revisionist readings of collective memory and history.

Other writers, such as Elias Khoury, were less interested in culture as a unit of analysis. Instead, they looked at the wounded national community prevented from mourning its war-incurred losses. So began a process of examining collective memory, reconciliation, and trauma and conceiving of the literary text as a site for staging a new ethos of writing.⁸ It was a moment of loss, but also one of reconfiguring what it means to be an intellectual amid the ruins of the modernist discourse of emancipation. In this context, the intellectual was construed and mourned as a messianic figure, a crucible of the pains of his

⁷ Rashid Al-Daif, *Dear Mr. Kawabata*, trans. Paul Starkey (London: Quartet Books, 1999); Rashid Al-Daif, *Who's Afraid of Meryl Streep?*, trans. Paula Haydar and Nadine Sinno (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014); Rashid Al-Daif, *Tablit al-Bahr* (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis, 2011).

⁸ Khoury redefined the postwar political writer by articulating a nuanced reading of the notion of *iltizām*. He and other public intellectuals questioned their wartime militancy in a collective act of introspection that ushered in a revisionist historiography of the civil war and a reexamination of power and the hegemonic practices of postwar reconstruction agendas. Among a wide spectrum of essays, obituaries, novels, and interviews, see Elias Khoury, "The Memory of the City," *Grand Street*, no. 54 (October 1, 1995): 137–42; Elias Khoury and Sonja Mejcher, "Interview with Elias Khoury: The Necessity to Forget and to Remember," *Banipal*, no. 12 (2001).

national community.⁹ Despite the idealization of intellectuals as tragic figures, some voices were more interested in a different representation of postwar writers. A reconfiguration of the politics of mourning is particularly pronounced in Rabee Jaber's fictionalization of intellectuals. Jaber probes the idealization of wartime intellectuals from the vantage point of a self-effacing and self-defeating interlocutor. In several of his novels, he writes a counternarrative of the trials of the embattled artists and writers and situates them not in a messianic discourse—the perennial narrative of suicide as a selfless act of political protest—but in those intellectuals' personal and intimate melancholic afflictions aggravated by existential angst.¹⁰ The melancholic subjects in Jaber's novels are not prophets or tragic heroes, merely people of their contemporary times, alienated by the world and disenchanted with the word.

As the Lebanese Civil War ended, the Gulf War began. The sectarian violence of the civil war was not singular in fostering deep anxieties about the yield of modernist teleologies. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent retaliation of the allied forces against Iraq were the final blow in a series of political defeats of Arab nationalism as an ideology of unification and emancipation, an experience of defeat that was first felt with the ebbing of Nasserism. The splintering of a unified anticolonial and anti-imperialist Arab position began in the wake of the 1977 Camp David agreement. With that historic yet controversial treaty, Egypt became the first Arab state to recognize Israel—to the shock of militant Arab intellectuals who had identified as Marxists or Arab nationalists.¹¹ The ideological void left by the ebbing of pan-Arab worldviews reintroduced Islam and

⁹ The idealization and romanticization of the postwar Lebanese intellectual is particularly salient in elegies to intellectuals whose deaths symbolized the end of an era for Khoury and were the symptom of a sterile Arab present. Refer to Khoury's numerous obituaries of friends and peers in the cultural supplement *Mulhaq al-Nahar*, which he edited between 1992 and 2009.

¹⁰ Fictionalizing the last days of dying intellectuals has been the signature move of Jaber's early works. In *Al-Bayt al-Akhir* [The Last House] (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1996), he fictionalizes the life and death of film director Maroun Baghdadi. He returns to the themes of loss and tragic figures in *Ralph Rizqallah Fi Al-Mir'at* [Ralph Rizkallah through the looking glass] (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1997).

¹¹ Perhaps the most vocal critic of the agreement has been Saadallah Wannous, who spoke extensively about the peace treaty as the last installment in a series of political defeats that began with the Naksa in 1967. See his classic essay: Saadallah Wannous, "Anā Al-Janāza Wa-l-Mushayyi'ūn" [I am the coffin and the procession], in *Al-A'māl Al-Kāmila* [The complete works] (Damascus: al-Ahālī li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī', 1996), 439–43. Wannous refrained from writing plays for eleven years after the incident. On the meaning of his silence and the trauma of intellectuals, see Zeina G. Halabi, "Keeping Silent, or the Silence that Kept Saadallah Wannous," in *On Wannous: Critical Studies on the Syrian Playwright and Public Intellectual*, ed. Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and Robert Myers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 59–77.

sectarian structures of identification as the old-new paradigm for reading the world. As such, the postnationalist moment brought in defeat, indeed, but it also reconciled with a religious tradition that had been left out of the field of vision.

An illustration of that turn in contemporary literature comes to us from the Gulf.¹² Of interest here is Saudi writer Seba al-Herz, who exposes in *Al-Akharun* (*The Others*) the rigidity of religious and patriarchal structures while pointing to the infertility of secular nationalism as an ideology of emancipation.¹³ The troubled narrator draws on filial, transnational, and religious structures of identity that organize her experience of personal and communal loss. As such, the contemporary crystallizes in *The Others* precisely when secular nationalist ideologies break down and the trope of the militant Shi'i emerges. This new trope points to the interstices of local, transnational (i.e., Iraq, Iran, Lebanon), traditional, and nonsecular modes of representation and liberation. As it redefines what constitutes the political, the novel ultimately disturbs the nationalist sensibilities of the modern Arabic literary tradition.

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Lebanese Civil War, and the Gulf War, the Palestinian question had returned, particularly after the events of the First Intifada (1987–91). The Oslo Peace Accords between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the state of Israel in 1993 stipulated a new political and legalistic understanding of Palestinians' displacement and their right of return. The establishment of the PLO in 1965 and the defeat of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in the 1967 war had initiated a liberation rhetoric that infused new life into the legacy of the exilic intellectual. The intellectual

¹² Although my focus here is on Seba al-Herz's unique approach to religious (inter)nationalism, other writers have articulated a critique of the infertility of secular nationalism. For a closer look on Christian communities, exile, and the redefinition of citizenship, see Sinan Antoon, *The Baghdad Eucharist* (Cairo: Hoopoe, 2017). More recently, the subject of sectarianism in Iraq and the myth of coexistence have returned in the surreal, cynical, and tragic short stories of Hasan Blasim. See Hasan Blasim, *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq*, trans. Jonathan Wright (New York: Penguin Books, 2014).

¹³ *Al-Akharun* appeared in Arabic in 2006 under the pseudonym Seba al-Herz. In the 2009 English translation of the novel, titled *The Others*, the publisher preserved the anonymity of the author and the translator and identified Seba al-Herz as "the pseudonym of a twenty-six-year-old Saudi woman from al-Qatif in Saudi Arabia." See Seba Al-Herz, *The Others*, trans. Anonymous (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009). Writing anonymously or pseudonymously is not uncommon in Arabic (particularly Gulf) women's literature. Samira Khashoggi (1935–1986) and Sultana al-Sudayri (1940–2011), for example, began publishing under pseudonyms to avoid social stigma and religious conservatism in the mid-twentieth century. In contemporary Saudi literature, Warda Abdel Malak and Faiza Said are just two Saudi writers who publish under pen names. For a gendered reading of Saudi religious nationalism and a political economic reading of the new wave of fiction from the Gulf since the 2000s, see Madawi al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

of the time was a proponent of resistance literature that Palestinian, Marxist, nationalist Ghassan Kanafani theorized, a politically committed intellectual who brings forward the question of cultural resistance, marrying theory and praxis.¹⁴ Following successive military setbacks—from the tragic events of the 1970 Black September war in Jordan to the renewed exile of Palestinian intellectuals from Beirut in 1982—all paths led to political settlement. Moving from the national liberation trope of the 1960s and 1970s and the nation-building trope of the 1980s, the Oslo Accords ushered in an era of settlement and negotiation, exemplified in the building of a pseudo-state bureaucracy in the boundaries of a nonsovereign political entity.¹⁵ This is the post-Oslo era, in which political pragmatism, neoliberalism, and growth under occupation overrule national liberation.

At stake in this political and discursive mutation is the legitimacy of the exilic intellectual, who returned, not to the Palestine of Mahmoud Darwish's poetry and Ghassan Kanafani's short stories, but to the Palestinian Territories, a neologism evoking neither emancipation nor autonomy. In this context of aborted emancipation and false return of exiled Palestinians, the portrait of the militant intellectual has been reconfigured by a new generation of writers less interested in the performative power of exile and more attentive to the political in the Palestinian here and now. This emerging

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sensibility is best illustrated in the work of a new generation of Palestinian poets, including Asmaa Azaizeh, Dalia Taha, and Jumana Mustafa, who attempt to carve out their place in the literary field with an eye on Darwish's legacy.¹⁶ Turning their gaze toward the slippery notion of the Palestinian ordinary,

¹⁴ Barbara Harlow reads Ghassan Kanafani's conception of resistance literature against the backdrop of a wider anti-imperialist literature of cultural resistance hailing from the post-Bandung Third World. Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1987).

¹⁵ On post-Oslo Palestinian culture and the arts, see Hanan Toukan, "On Delusion, Art, and Urban Desires in Palestine Today: An Interview with Yazid Anani," *Arab Studies Journal* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 209.

¹⁶ See the recent bilingual anthology of contemporary Palestinian (and German) poets, introduced by Amjad Nasser, who theorizes post-Darwish poetry, in Asmaa Azaizeh, ed., *Hajar lam yuqlab* [Unturned stone] (Amman: Dar al-Ahliyya, 2017). For a post-Arab Spring reading of Darwish's iconography, see Oraib Toukan, "We, the Intellectuals': Re-Routing Institutional Critique," *Ibraaz*, July 29, 2014, http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/98#_ftnref24.

writers and filmmakers have taken us to Israeli checkpoints, roadblocks, walls, and sieges, while others reexamined the notion of displacement by decentering the figure of the exiled intellectual and destabilizing its signifiers. Novelist Alaa Hlehel observes how the demise of an overarching and uniting Palestinian liberation project has led to the emergence of antiheroic dystopic motifs in literature and cinema that point to the inadequacies of existing paradigms for reading contemporary Palestinian literature.¹⁷ Adania Shibli's protagonist in *Minor Detail* roams the Naqab desert, occupied by the ghostly manifestations of a Bedouin woman murdered by the Israeli Defense Forces in 1949.¹⁸ In these narratives of the traumatic and the ordinary, exile is no longer as Edward Said or Jabra Ibrahim Jabra had imagined it: an ideal space for intellectual distance, creativity, and ultimately emancipation.¹⁹ The contemporary manifests itself as it navigates away from the discursive power of exile, while embracing the somatic and the affective as the remaining spaces for revelation.

The aftermath of such decisive historical junctures has engendered an unnamed, unqualified, and inconspicuous contemporary era that is defined not by what it is but relationally by what it lacks and what it transgresses and classifies as past. Writers experienced these profound transformations in the collapse of the secular nation-state, as illustrated by the violent sectarianism of the Lebanese Civil War, the last installment in a series of consecutive political defeats that had begun in the early 1960s and culminated in the 1967 war. More significantly, the dislocation of the nationalist, socialist, and pan-Arab ideological paradigms, which had framed literary and intellectual discourse in the twentieth century, transformed how writers conceived of the literary as the carrier and embodiment of an ethos of emancipation. Paradigms that provided ideological underpinning for emancipation receded; in a time when resolution is suspended, the present literary moment stagnates at the intersection of irony and melancholic affect, mistakenly read as a testament to the end of the political.

¹⁷ Alaa Hlehel, "Al-Riwa'i al-Filastini Alaa Hlehel: Jili Istabd al-Surat al-Batal bi-l-la-Batal" [Palestinian novelist Alaa Hlehel: My generation replaced the image of the hero with the non-hero], *Al-Qabas*, May 21, 2016, <http://alqabas.com/42603/>.

¹⁸ Adania Shibli, *Minor Detail*, trans. Elisabeth Jaquette (New York: New Directions, 2020).

¹⁹ Jabra theorized the exile of Palestinian intellectuals throughout his career. His essay "The Palestinian Exile as Writer," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8, no. 2 (1979): 77–87, and novel *In Search of Walid Masoud*, trans. Roger M. A. Allen and Adnan Haydar (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), illustrate the tragic but deeply romantic figure of the Palestinian intellectual. Channeling Jabra, Said speaks extensively about the critical power of exile and the tragic fate of exiled intellectuals, particularly in "Reflections on Exile," in *Reflections on Exile*.

The Political as Contemporary

Contemporary writers experience, internalize, and then reconstruct the injunctions of modern literature. They challenge its stable triangulation of past/present/future and the inevitable transition to a future of certainty and liberation. The texts that I examined here exemplify how contemporary writers probe teleologies conditioned on the stable triangulation of past/present/future temporalities without discarding the past as a unit of analysis. The past continues to be a site for confronting contested memories and articulating contemporary anxieties. Writers revisit the past to make sense of the troubled contemporary moment. There appears to be an overarching sentiment that the past, no matter how one wants to delineate and historicize it, cannot be accepted as a given in the temporal prism of past/present/future. It must be excavated, demystified, and archived. Despite writers' continuous attention to the past, the present and its injunctions remain a site for inquiry.

Contemporary writers have not simply abandoned the notion of emancipation but have pointed to the fault lines apparent in its formal, linguistic, and conceptual dissonance. The tropes that these narratives probe are not the object of gratuitous critique but, as Hanan Toukan observes in her research on contemporary artists, "are although admired, often also bemoaned and interrogated through different art forms for embodying a failed aesthetics of resistance." I concur with Toukan's observation about how contemporary artists (in our case writers) return to their predecessors "to understand their critical role in the life, death and afterlife of a botched modernist project of liberation where the centrality of writing was an unquestionable tool in the collective experience of subjugation and hence resistance and commitment to change."²⁰ As such, contemporary writers do not surrender the political. Instead, they reconfigure it by displacing how modern literature had construed the political.

Although contemporary writers have deconstructed political commitment, they have kept a tight grip on the political. Theirs is a cynical, ambivalent, mournful, and irreverent revisit of modernist tropes of emancipation. Facing the skepticism of modernist epistemologies and aesthetics, they have to defend their apparent cynicism and demonstrate all the ways they safeguard notions of atonement and salvation. Close readings have shown how the political unravels. First, it professes a contemporary subjectivity that is reflexive and retrospec-

²⁰ Hanan Toukan, "Whatever Happened to *Iltizām*? Words in Arab Art after the Cold War," in *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections On/Of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s*, ed. Georges Khalil and Friederike Pannewick (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2015), 339.

tive; second, it ultimately transcends canonical literary tropes and genres and reimagines modern literary parameters.

I hope to have made the opaque contemporary conjuncture legible by highlighting the political critique inherent in a presumed postpolitical aesthetic moment. Specifically, I probed the available critical corpus that reads late twentieth-century Arabic literature as an apolitical and fragmented discourse insofar as it transgresses the modern ethos of political commitment. I have shown how, as contemporary writers lost their precursors' faith in the secular nation-state, rational political action, and the Arab subject that emerged out of these structures, they articulated a new vision of a political collectivity and subjectivity. In so doing, contemporary writers relocate their critique from an explicit logocentric, teleological, secular-nationalist discourse to one that is anachronistic, transnational, nonsecular, and latently affective, one that predicates the political on the personal. It is significant inasmuch as it invites us to conceptualize that which we call "the (Arab) contemporary."

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