

## **SPACES OF LIBERATION? GEO-HERMENEUTICAL READING OF THE NEW WOMEN'S NOVEL IN JORDAN**

*Espaços de libertação? Leitura geohermenêutica do novo romance feminino na Jordânia*

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### **Introduction**

The New Feminist/Women Novel in Jordan is at the core this contribution. The main research question is to read and analyze hermeneutically the spaces of women's liberation in two novels: "Out of the Body" (BATAINEH, 2004), and "Layla, the Snow and Ludmilla" (AL-ZOUBI, 2007). The two novels reflect a new trend in the literature landscape of Jordan: new literature topics and language, new social and educational backgrounds of the novelists, all in changing sociopolitical situation in the country. In this contribution, first, a short analysis of the sociopolitical changes and developments in the country in the last two decades will be given; secondly, the contribution aims to embedded the emerge of the new feminist literature within the ongoing sociopolitical changes; and last but not least, a hermeneutical reading of the spaces of women's liberation in the two novels will explain the limits, limitations and dynamics of the geographical representation of women's liberation.

Geo-hermeneutics as an epistemological method opens wide perspectives to localize sociopolitical processes in connection with individual and artistic representation (AL-HAMARNEH, 2005; JAMES 1998). The method allows an analysis that goes beyond the symbolic reading of locations and geographies as well as beyond the discursive and contextual explorations. Geo-hermeneutics embedded dialectically the symbols, discourses and contexts within the spatial and spaces. Recent research by the geographers Paul Adams and Tim Cresswell show new perspectives of geo-hermeneutics (ADAMS, 2017; CRESSWELL, 2017).

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The main goal of this contribution is to understand how the new feminist novel in Jordan addresses the issue of women's liberation within the new social and political conditions.

### **The changing sociopolitical situation**

Three major events dominate the developments in Jordan in the last two decades:

1. The political detachment from the West Bank in 1988 as a consequence of the first Intifada and the resulted long-term policies of the reproduction and reinvention of a "Jordanian identity" by various campaigns as "Jordan First" (2002). The rise of identity politics within a troubled region have mainly resulted in the rise of "East-Jordanian" political identity and politics of Identity in the country and society (JOFFE, 2002, 2012).
2. The Ma'an revolt in April 1989 that included massive protests in the cities of al-Karak and al-Salt, while the cities with majority of inhabitants of Palestinian origins stayed tranquil (Amman, Zarqa, Russaifah). The 1989 revolt resulted in political liberalization in the country including the cancelation of the emergency laws, legalization of political parties and a new liberal political "National Charter" in 1992. Different projects of election law and of family codex have been changing and framing the public discussions about the rights of the women since the 1990. The electoral successes of Toujan Faisal and later on of Hind el-Fayez as well as the women's quota in the parliament are landmarks in the changing political life in Jordan. Law projects on "honor crimes", "citizenship right for the children of Jordanian mothers" and the "right of divorce for women" are among those laws that challenged/are challenging the traditional patriarchal orders in the country (SCHWEDELER, 2010; COOGLE, 2016).
3. The Wadi Araba peace treaty with Israel in 1994 resulting in major difference between the old friends: the Islamists, mainly the Muslim Brothers (Islamic Action Front and Hamas) and the Jordanian State (the Palace and the government). Since then a love-hate political relationship has emerged between the State and the Islamists (BRAND, 1999).

These major changes framed the rise of the importance of the provincial cities and the centers of the "East-Jordanian" political activities: Maan, al-Karak, Irbid, al-Salt and al-Mafraq became political importance such as the capital city, Zarqa and al-Russeifah. The geographical shift in political centers was reflected in clear structural divisions and ideological/political differences within the Islamic movement and the rise of importance of the tribal and regional political powers.

Within these contexts is the rise of new literature by "East-Jordanians" socialized in areas outside the Amman-Zarqa metropolitan area to be noticed<sup>2</sup>. The topics and spaces of the new literature are embedded in the East-Jordanian social context and geographies: villages, country life, tribes. The urban and the Palestine/Palestinian-relevant focuses are rather secondary or even totally missed in this literature. The

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<sup>2</sup> For example the novels by Jalal Brajas, "Snakes of the Fire" (Afai el-Nar) and "A Guillotine of the Dreamer (Maqsalat el-Halem); by Ziad Mahaftheh, "Prisoners of the Darkness" (Nuzala el-Atmeh) and "The Day, the Butterflies disappointed me" (Yaoum Khathalatni el-Farashat); and by Ramadhan Al-Rawashdeh "The River Will Not Separate Us" (al-Naher lan Yafselni Anek).

earlier “East-Jordanian” literature production<sup>3</sup> of Ghaleb Halassa, Tayseer Sboul, Mou’nes al-Razaz, Hashem Gharaibeh, Saoud Qbeilat, Suheir Al-Tall for example is rather urban or place-less or absolutely embedded in the Palestinian cause and general pan-arab context (MAHMOOD, HADDAD, 2015). The new literature builds up on the existing literature traditions and experiences not only of the earlier “East-Jordanian” literature, but the “Palestinian” literature, mainly by many Palestinian writers living in Jordan. Not to forget the common Palestinian-Jordanian cultural production during the post-Nakbeh years until the occupation of the West Bank and East-Jerusalem in 1967 and the rise of Palestinian liberation movements and especially the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The cultural and physical presence of the Palestinian novelists and poets in Jordan, mainly in Amman, frames the macro-space of literature production in the country and frames the emerge of the new East-Jordanian novel.

### **Novels, Women Emancipation and Feminist Writers**

The issues of women rights and women emancipation are one of the major conflict frontiers between the Islamists, the traditionalists and conservatives on the one side, and the democratic, leftist and modernist movements on in the country, on the other side. Cultural production (fine art, literature, theater, cinema and TV) is a core element of the confrontation<sup>4</sup>. Literature in general and novels in particular, due to the limited numbers of circulation, high prices for novels, possibility of censorship and the relatively higher possibility of freedom of expression, open more sophisticated and extended space of confrontation including “Bildungsroman”<sup>5</sup>, “Zeitgeist novels”<sup>6</sup> and autobiographic novels.

The two novels “Out of the Body” and “Layla, the Snow and Ludmilla” represent a mixture of Zeitgeist and autobiographic novels. The novelists al-Bataineh and al-Zou’bi belong to a new generation of (East-)Jordanian women that benefitted from school education in the country side and took advantage of extended and diverse system of scholarships in higher education (scholarships were provided in the 70s and 80s by the state, PLO, NGOs, political parties and organizations, foreign countries etc.). Many men and less number of women left the less-developed villages in the country side and the not-real-urban provincial towns directly to attend higher education institutions in Europe, USSR, USA and more developed Arab countries like Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. This rural-urban migration is framed within the culture and more-developed countries of the global North and huge difference between the traditional tribal society of rural Jordan and the more cosmopolitan urban cities of Alexandria, Aleppo, Beirut, Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus and Mosul of the 70s and 80s of the last century. The experiences of the relatively urban-

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, “A Star” (Nijmah) by Ghaleb Halassa, “You, from Today” (Anti Munth el-Yaoum) by Tayseer Sboul, “Alive in the Dead Sea” (Ahya fil Bahr el-Mayet) by Mou’nes al-Razaz, “Sahbander” (Shahbandar) by Hashem Gharaibeh, “Malking” (Mashii) by Saoud Qbeilat and “Scaffold” (Mashnaqa) by Suheir Al-Tall.

<sup>4</sup> See for example the case of Nahed Hattar (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/nahed-hattar-shot-dead-prominent-jordanian-writer-charged-with-offensive-facebook-post-killed-a7328651.html>) and the case of Mashrou Laila concert (<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/33/204547/Arts--Culture/Music/Mashrou-Leila-releases-statement-after-Jordanian-a.aspx>)

<sup>5</sup> In literary criticism, a Bildungsroman means a novel of formation, education and culture. For more information see Encyclopædia Britannica.

<sup>6</sup> Zeitgeist means “spirit of time and age”. Zeitgeist novels are novels reflecting the spirit of time (Hendrix, 2005).

developed society of Amman are missed in the biography of the both writers as well as in the biography of the major female figures in the both novels: Layla and Mona.

Though the both novels are not fully autobiographic, but curtain and important parallels between the life baths and experiences of the two writers and their novels' main female figures are very much clear: the village, the patriarchal society, the migration. Both novels reflect the Zeitgeist of the 80s and the 90s without ignoring the social and political roots of the discussed issues that took place in the 70s and even the 60s. Both novels are "first" novels, where usually, many topics and issues are rather "mentioned" but not "discussed". Later novels by the authors, "The Last Temptation" by al-Bataineh and "The Bastard" and "C" by al-Zou'bi show a higher level of topic "focusing" and "mono-concentration".

### Spaces of Liberation

In "Out of the Body" (*kharej al-jassad*) by AfafBataineh a clear development and hierarchy of spaces of women liberation is described and shown:

- Mona's parents' house in the village where she is often beaten and mishandled and denied all personal rights; where she is blackmailed and alienated.
- Mona's uncle house in the village. The former political prisoner and progressive uncle who offered her in his own house a temporary shelter and protection.
- The forest, where she used to meet her first love.
- The house of the first husband, where curtain spatial and social autonomy was gained. The house where a woman, her mother-in-law and her auntie, is a major player in the mishandling machine and patriarchal anti-women order.
- The provincial university, where the space of repression has a "modern" and "fancy" image and form. The university space that reflects and re-produces the social and political repression and the discrimination against women in open and elitist sitting.
- London/UK represents many spaces of repression and liberation: the patriarchal "migratory" space of some Arab migrants, where the Jordanian "village" is socially re-produced and the anti-women attitudes are re-invented; London is the space of opportunities by taking advantage of the legal framework and the social and feminist networks of solidarity and assistance to break out, to escape from the patriarchal trap abroad; UK becomes a space of threat and danger as soon as Mona breaks up totally with the social and religious norms, values and traditions of the Jordanian society and decides to marry an English Christian man: the possibility of a "crime honor" against her became real when her "progressive uncle" visits her and shows her the limits of his own "progressiveness" and the limits of the acceptance of women's liberation by *THE* traditional society back home, in Jordan.
- Mona's body as a real space of repression and liberation. Mona changes not only her name and place or residence; She changes her face by undergoing various cosmetic surgeries.

- Mona, the new Mona in her new body and identity as Sarah Alexander, goes back to her birth village and to Amman to advice and to assist as an international expert in women affairs. Jordan, Amman and the birth village became spaces of international interactions, of globalization .... But not really a space of liberation.

In “Layla, the Snow and Ludmilla” (*lailawaludmilawal-thalj*) by Kafa Al-Zoubi the hierarchy and development of spaces of liberation is less sophisticated and rather more symbolic:

The village and Layla’s parent’s house plays the same role as Mona’s: space of repression and mishandling, where no female solidarity exists. The patriarchal and aggressive character of the tribal rural society, especially the attitudes towards/against women, is clearly spatially embedded in the family space. The progressive uncle of Mona, is here the father of Layla: his limits and limitations of progressiveness are the rights of the women and the women’s body and behavior. Being declared progressive person and even leftist according to Kafa Al-Zoubi’s figure, the character Layla, does not necessary include democratic and women-friendly vision and attitude. This contradiction in behavior and political ideology is one of the clearest motives in the both novels: they both accuse the “progressive” men (and movements) that they cannot go beyond their patriarchal understanding of the women rights and that they are rather trapped in the anti-women “traditions” of/in the social space of the country, city, village and “home”.

The migratory space, USSR, is for Layla a space of personal, gender and political finding. She cannot go beyond the values of patriarchal village and family: she takes the role of the observer and even the judge upon transformations in society and personalities taking place. Layla is not taking advantage of the liberation chance and freedom opportunities in the new country: she is rather socially “displaced” and is facing huge challenges to adjust and to be integrated.

The space of body is central in the novel as well. Layla has no command on her body: she is trapped between patriarchal morality and the possible sexual freedom available in Russia as a mixture of social freedom, lifestyle and ideological concept. Layla loses her virginity unwillingly and not due to sex act: she falls down in an icy day and loses her virginity by the accident. The icy cold street, the snow in the novel’s title, is the “male” to whom she loses her virginity: “He” is white, cold and stranger while the act takes place in public by accident and it loveless and undeliberate. Mona refuses to lose her virginity without love and without a decision taking by her. Mona insists that her body belongs to her like her mind: two spaces of personal freedom: the body and the ideas. Layla ignores the freedom of the body: she decides that it is secondary to the ideas and to the mental experiences, but, nevertheless, she cannot deal with a “freed” and “liberated” body. Layla keeps her body for herself and keeps her relationship with the character Igor secret and hardly told in the novel (one page of 549): she keeps the patriarchal body mentally “untouched” no matter that the “snow” liberated the body from the main patriarchal “value” of women’s dissemination: virginity. Her fear from the character Rashid, who discovers her relationship with Igor and beats her and Igor, and whom she denied a relationship, this fear is the columniation of the patriarchal values: the body is free, but the mind and the behavior are not. This is demonstrated in her second relationship with the painter character, Yevgeny: in the moment he paints Layla naked, she destroys the painting and the relationship ends due another woman in Yevgeny’s life. Layla has sexual relationships only with Russian men and keeps her relationships secret. She is not ready to face to society and to insist on her freedom: the

migratory space is a transit space and not a space of liberation and emancipation. It is rather a space of experiences and passing; the characters Andrey and Rashid, the two faces of patriarchal attitudes: the naïve romantic and the aggressive suppressed; Layla and Ludmilla, the two faces of emancipation: the pragmatic and the contested. The novel discusses extensively the body question especially the Andrey-Rashid attitude towards Layla's body: contrary to Mona's body, the main character in "Out of the Body", the body of Layla is discussed by men through their perception. Layla is rather a passive voyeur to her own body and its social and moral values. Ludmilla, at the end of the novel, is pregnant and does not tell who the father is, and Layla decides to go back to Jordan. The Layal-Ludmilla one-in-two figure is an emancipated out-of-space character not able to decide the limits of its own liberation.

## Conclusions

The new women's novel in Jordan has three major social spatial aspects:

The village with its conservative tribal patriarchal social system and values, where the repression and the struggle for liberation and emancipation takes place, represents the hard space of processes of socio-political change. The village represents the rise of the importance of the East-Jordanian spaces and communities in the general socio-political developments in Jordan, while the Amman-Zarqa Metropolitan Area is under control of non-democratic and reactionary political powers: the state and the Islamists (including Hamas). The Palestinian national political movement in Jordan (Fateh & co.) is rather tranquil since 1989. The various protests in the last 10 years in the cities of Irbid, el-Salt, el-Karak, el-Tafieleh and Maan confirm the role of rural and provincial spaces in the social and political changes in the country including the issues of women emancipation and liberation.

UK, USSR (Russia) and the global North plays a central role as a space of experiences, liberation and freedom. Both novels highlight the importance to mobility and the ability to take advantage of being in "liberated" spaces for self-finding and learning processes. It seems to be that both Mona and Layla are not able to liberate themselves without the transnational experience. This questions the international factor in the issue of women rights in Jordan and the possibilities of social and legal changes within the existing frameworks and structures.

The body is crucial in both novels as a space of control, space of morality and values, space of liberation and emancipation and last but not least as a space of gender politics. It goes beyond the issue of the Foucauldian biopolitics towards the dialectical governmentality of the body. Mona's governmentality of her own body as a social, political and topographic space of struggle stands in a contrary way towards Layla's body as a space of social governmentality.

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## RESUMO

Os romancistas feministas contemporâneos na Jordânia estão levantando questões de emancipação, de sociedade patriarcal, de violência contra mulheres e de atitudes sociais de maneiras desacostumadas, desconhecidas no início do país. Isso é incorporado nos desenvolvimentos políticos e socioeconômicos que ocorrem no país desde 1990. O principal objetivo dessa análise de cenários é explorar e repensar o nexo espaço-gênero no novo romance feminino usando abordagens geo-hermenêuticas.

**Palavras-chave:**Jordânia, Feminismo, Literatura, Romance, Geo-Hermenêutica, Libertação;

## ABSTRACT

Contemporary feminist novelists in Jordan are raising issues of emancipation, patriarchal society, violence against women and social attitudes in unaccustomed ways unknown earlier in the country. This is embedded within the political and socio-economic developments taking place in the country since 1990. The main aim of this scenario analysis is to explore and to re-think the space-gender nexus in the new women's novel using geo-hermeneutical approaches.

**Key-words:** Jordan, Feminism, Literature, Novel, Geo-Hermeneutics, Liberation