

Lindsey Moore. Narrating *Postcolonial Arab Nations: Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine.*

London: Routledge, 2018. 252 p. ISBN: 9 7811 3883 0882. £88.

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- ¹ *Narrating Postcolonial Arab Nations* is a study of literary narratives spanning the Middle East over the last half-century. Its focus is on works that both observe and perform revolt against repressive power structures, whether colonial or part of its aftermaths. Setting the stage for analysis and its intervention in postcolonial studies, the book opens with a reflection on the cover image chosen for *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies* (2013): a photograph of a protester in Cairo's Tahrir Square during the historic early days of the 2011 uprising against President Hosni Mubarak's thirty-year rule. Moore's reading of the cover not only establishes the volume's geographical and temporal framework, but also introduces some of its key themes: repression, revolt, and the disjuncture that often occurs between national imaginaries and actual state formations. From 2011's moment of historic rupture, Moore looks forward to what remains politically unrealised following the uprisings, as well as back into the long history of collective struggles across the region. She draws on a wide range of authors, from renowned writers such as Naguib Mahfouz and Assia Djebar, to contemporary memoirists such as Raja Shehadeh and Ghada Karmi, in order to show how "Arab creative narratives anticipate and reflect retrospectively upon (contested, unfolding) histories" (1).
- ² For Moore, reading the *Handbook* cover is a way into discussing and critiquing "the tentative interface between the Arab world and postcolonial studies" (2). The growing

interaction between these interfaces allows her to both situate her scholarship within “the Anglophone postcolonial literary field” (4) as well as to critique the extent to which the Arab world has generally been overlooked by the field until relatively recently, with a coherent body of work now finally emerging, of which Moore’s monograph is very much a part. As she states, postcolonial literary studies has been “unconscionably slow” (4) in paying attention to the region. She usefully charts this developing engagement, acknowledging the work of scholars such as Anna Ball, Norbert Bugeja, Karim Mattar and Caroline Rooney, and asserts what a postcolonial perspective can provide, namely a productive framework for analysing texts that grapple with colonialism, neo-imperialism and nationalism. Moore is also refreshingly clear-eyed about the limitations of such a perspective. “We should remember,” she writes, “that a postcolonial approach follows *one* line, disclosing *one* part of a complex pattern” (7–8).

- 3 The book aims to “pi[n] down the postcoloniality of Arab literary production with reference to four specific contexts” (7), as well as demonstrate how “the postcolonial manifests as a continuous project” (16). Moore’s remit is literature attentive to national histories, drawn from Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon and Palestine, with a chapter devoted to each context. The chapters are at their strongest when engaged with questions of gender – such as the assessment of Jean Said Makdisi’s *Teta, Mother and Me* and Boualem Sansal’s work, or the elucidation of the ongoing impact of colonial and imperial legacies in the chapter on Lebanon, firmly anchored by a focus on gender and sexual violence. What also works really well is Moore’s attentiveness to the narration of alternative possibilities to current oppressive realities, whether those imagined by writers concerned with the ongoing Israeli occupation in Palestine, such as Shehadeh, or those grappling with state power in Egypt, such as Miral al-Tahawy.
- 4 The book is characterised by astute close textual analyses, which amply support the claims Moore is making. The study, though, would have benefited from an explicit discussion of the politics of translation; specifically Moore’s reliance on literary translations for analysis of works that are written in Arabic. Translations have been productively assessed recently by a number of postcolonial scholars (such as Anna Ball and Anna Bernard). A similar positioning of the work would have been useful in order to further bolster the analysis of the translated texts. The book has an ambitious multilingual focus, engaging substantially not just with translated Arabic literature but also with writers working in English and French. For example, the chapter on Algeria looks exclusively at authors working in French and the chapter on Palestine at English-authored texts. Such choices work overall and the book certainly engages with the issue of language in important ways, such as its observations about the development of French as a literary language for numerous Algerian writers, within a complicated post-independence context. With a colonial history undergirding the relationship between Arabic and European languages, this is crucial. But given that the study is explicitly motivated by the heterogeneity of national histories and their narrations, a more sustained attention to this relationship – as well as a fuller discussion of how other regional languages intersect with and problematise this – would have further cemented these choices.
- 5 Moore is sensitive throughout to the differences and complexities of each context – indeed, she is keen to underscore specificities and one of the strengths of the study is that each chapter is so distinctly realised, without the flattening of experience and

contexts that can so easily emerge in a study of this scope. But at times, Moore's commitment to specificity does come up against the need to reach for broad conclusions about multiple texts in order to advance her argument about postcolonial Arab narratives as "vehicles for the nation" (1) and to drive forward her "overarching focus on the Arab world within postcolonial literary studies" (169). To return to Moore's insightful assertion that a postcolonial approach follows only "one line," it seems worthwhile to ask whether – and how – this also fits with the tendency within the field towards work that takes an overarching perspective on a given topic.

- 6 While admittedly beyond the scope of Moore's study, a final question that arises is what might constitute an Arab narrative that is *not* postcolonial in the sense that she defines it – anticipating and reflecting on the upheavals of national histories – but that nonetheless overlaps with or productively challenges those narratives that are analysed. This question concerning the postcoloniality or otherwise of a text, as well as the larger question of how to appropriately engage with postcolonial studies in relation to the region, is less an indication of shortcomings in the work itself – which sets its parameters clearly – and more observations on the field as a whole, as well as on potential further work that could emerge from a reading of Moore's book – work that can remain firmly within postcolonial studies, or look to step outside it. *Narrating Postcolonial Arab Nations* is generous in its offering of routes into and out of the material it presents, which hopefully will encourage further scholarship.

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