

XVI Convegno SeSaMO

Università degli Studi di Cagliari
Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali

3-5 ottobre 2024



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO/TITLE: New politics and aesthetics of representation in Moroccan literature

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ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

In *Le roman maghrébin* (1979), Abdelkébir Khatibi claims that writing fiction is deploying “un ensemble d’attitudes” vis-à-vis both the extra-textual reality and the writing itself. Every literary work, in fact, is a description of the world and a piece of meta-literature at once. Moreover, from Khatibi’s postcolonial point of view, Moroccan (and Maghrebi) literature also participates in the nation building process, creating imaginaries and (re)designing national boundaries. But which kind of imaginaries and boundaries does Moroccan literature create today?

In the 1960s, after a couple of decades in which the Maghrebi novel had grown within the French novel, the window of experimental fiction opened up. The formalistic, experimental, and (to some extent) self-referential dimension of the text, which had found in narratology and structuralist literary criticism a faithful ally – or, as critic Yaḥyà bin al-Walīd (2012) calls it, “a religion” – in the 1980s, seems to have been almost completely eclipsed today, so much that some Moroccan writers complain about the blowup of bulky historical novels at the expenses of any other novelistic forms. Moroccan critics (and writers), however, have never renounced to considering the novel as a part of the social structure (Fernández Parrilla 2006). As a young Moroccan writer puts it, “the Moroccan novel keeps clinging on realism, yet it does not shy away from inventing marvellous worlds” (Ballūṭ 2023).

Following global aesthetic trends and circulation patterns influenced by the material dynamics of the cultural industry, today’s Moroccan novel in Arabic is experiencing a revival of the great narratives that postmodern literature had somewhat disdained. The Arabic historical novel has made a resounding comeback into the limelight in recent years (Boustani et al. 2022), even hybridized with new forms, such as what scholars have called the “maximalist novel” (Ercolino 2015), the new epic, and so on. The pan-Arab literary prizes of the Gulf, which encourage the “grand narratives” at the expense of the Deleuzian “minor literature”, can be also listed among the causes for the resurgence of such genres.

At the same time as this trend seems to be consolidating, Moroccan literature is also giving place to “other” narratives. After the end of the Years of Lead and the start of the civil reconciliation process at the beginning of the third millennium, the need to record the repression and state violence suffered, as well as to build “other-archives” (El Guabli 2023) that would compensate for the “memory lapses” of official archives, became increasingly pressing. And so became the urge of giving voice to phenomena with high social impact such as migration, racism, and the rediscovery of other indigenous identities after the end of the postcolonial season of Arabisation. In this trend, feminist issues and the role of women have also become increasingly present in Moroccan literature. The first two decades of the 21st century have witnessed a raise both in the publication of women’s writing and in the attention drawn by it. A trend of feminist literary criticism initiated in the 1990s has experienced a considerable push in the past decades, bringing forward debates that explore the implications of the relationship between women and writing and promoting the study of writing by women free from misogynistic perspectives (Binmas’ūd 1994, 2006; Kurrām 2004; al-Madagrī 2009; Labšīr 2013; al-Nāšīr 2014, 2016; Kaddū 2014; Brāhīma 2019; Būqaftān 2021). As for the new novels published by women, they are both reviving older yet not-surpassed motives, such as the participation of women during the Years of Lead, and reflecting newer issues related to individual freedoms and sexuality, amongst other matters that became more present in the public debate after the Arab Spring. Finally, it is necessary to mention the increasing interest in fiction and poetry written in Tamazight, witnessed – for instance – by the recent establishment of the *Tamazgha Studies Journal* (2023), which also testifies the progressive expansion of Maghrebi studies in English.

Thus, one of the keywords of the new Moroccan novel in Arabic seems to be *representation* in its double meaning of *portraying reality* and *giving someone a voice* – the latter point especially referring to minoritised gendered subjectivities, subaltern social classes, oppressed political entities, racialised individuals or groups, and so on. While the interest in the referential world is revived and realism is resurgent, what this label contains is nonetheless everchanging: narratives with strong national connotations, but in which the structure of the nation is enlarged, expanded, pluralised, under the banner of the recognition of the ever new and different elements that make it up. The conception of what is considered as “Moroccan literature” has been enlarged in the past few decades, to encompass literature not only written in different languages, but also produced from different geographies (Fernández Parrilla and Calderwood 2021). The polyphony becomes extremely rich and varied, as much at the level of individual works as at the level of the literary field. The Moroccan novel, more precisely, can be conceived as an intersection of fields whose primary boundaries run along the lines of the written language – Arabic, French, Spanish and, more recently, Tamazight and English – but are not limited to it. The picture that emerges is that of a plural and extremely diverse ecosystem where different languages, traditions, themes, and audiences coexist, and where one of the challenges for scholars is that of “reading together” (Laachir 2016) these articulated and multilayered writings.

This panel aims to bring out the new trajectories of fiction in contemporary Morocco, exploring how *representation* with its double-edged meaning is at work in different genres, themes, and modes of expression. Proposals may focus on:

- novel and short story
- poetry
- graphic novel
- literary criticism
- women’s writing
- Moroccan literature beyond Arabic and French
- literary prizes
- book circulation mechanisms inside and outside Morocco
- book market and the publishing industry

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Fernanda Fischione is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie post-doc research fellow at Sapienza University of Rome with a project titled *Transnational Maghreb and the International Prize for Arabic Fiction: Pluralism, inclusiveness, and peaceful coexistence in the contemporary Maghrebi novel*. She holds a PhD in Modern and Contemporary Arabic Literature from the same university. Since 2015, she has carried out side-projects on rap and protest music in the SWANA region in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, and nation building and the novel in Jordan. Both projects have resulted in articles and conference presentations. Between 2020 and 2021 she was research assistant at SARAS Department – Sapienza University of Rome. She worked as a guest lecturer at the University of Macerata, where she taught courses in Arabic literature and culture and Arabic-to-Italian interpreting and translation (2019-2021). Besides her academic activities, she is a literary translator from Arabic into Italian and founder and editor of the magazine “Arabpop. Rivista di arti e letterature contemporanee”.

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