



## ESSE-8: LONDON 2006

29 August – 2 September 2006

### **S18. New English Literatures, Postcolonial Anglophone Arabic Writing and the Critic**

**Tuesday 29 August: 2.00-4.00pm**

Convenor: Christiane Schlote (University of Berne)

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There has been a growing body of postcolonial and diasporic Arabic literature in English. This seminar will explore the possibilities of situating Anglophone Arabic writing within New English Literatures and Postcolonial Studies and examine ways of critically engaging with these works. We invite contributions that may address, but are not limited to, the following topics: Representations / self-representations of Arab, Islamic, western stereotypes; Arab / Anglo-Arab / Arab American feminist writing; Transculturalism; Intertextuality; Pan-Arab / diasporic identity formations; Orientalism / Post-Orientalism; Islamophobia and literature.

#### **Forging a British Muslim Identity: Leila Aboulela's Fiction**

Claire Chambers (Leeds Metropolitan University)

This paper suggests that religious identity has tended to be subsumed in discussions of migrant or diasporic writing under such concepts as ethnicity, nationality, hybridity, and "blackness". However, I shall argue that the Sudanese-Scottish writer Leila Aboulela demonstrates the urgent need, within the current political landscape riven by inter-religious hatred, to explore and come to a greater understanding of worldviews shaped by religion.

Despite the "halal novelist" tag which has been coupled with Aboulela's name, the portrayal of Islam in her three fictional works to date is neither monolithic nor simplistically idealist, and the writer also largely avoids depicting Western modes of living in a reductive way. She is concerned to probe the ethical dilemmas faced by Muslims all over the world, and provides particularly nuanced descriptions of the British-based members of the transnational faith group, the Islamic umma. In this paper I will pay particular attention to Aboulela's treatment of such issues as the contrast between Sudan and Britain; attitudes towards Islam's prescribed practices; inter-religious relationships; Islamophobia; cultural translation; and different perceptions of freedom in Islamic and Western philosophy.

## **Literature, Theatre & Performance: The Role of Contemporary Arab American and Anglophone Arab Writers**

Nathalie Handal

Arab Americans have in general been stereotyped and excluded from literary and critical discourses. Since September 11th, mainstream American literary and theatrical spaces have tried to include works by Arab American authors. This paper focuses on these writers and their cultural narratives, and how their works are participating in bringing awareness to Arab and Arab American culture while demonstrating their artistic and aesthetic diversity, manifesting a richness of voices and imagination, and reflecting important changes taking place – culturally, socially, politically and artistically among Arabs in America.

### **The Border as Threshold in Naomi Shihab Nye's *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East***

Sally H. Michael (6<sup>th</sup> October University, Egypt)

The study explores the negated possibilities of Arab representation in mainstream Anglophone literature. The paper deals with transforming border into threshold through examining Nye's poetic oeuvre in an attempt to define orientalism or find that "language between two languages" that helps Arab Americans participate in two worlds thus preserving their heritage. *19 Varieties of Gazelle* explores possibilities of tolerance on several sides; the Palestinian, the Jewish and the American by employing story telling as a motif of transcendence over borders of limitation. The paper defines borders as an experience of both exile and threshold that have to be braved by cultures of hyphenation.

### **"Some internalisation of the other has already begun": Borderwork/Translation in Writing by Assia Djebar and Ahdaf Soueif**

Lindsey Moore (Lancaster University)

This paper focuses on translation as one of several metaphors for "border-crossing" in writing by Ahdaf Soueif and Assia Djebar. Both return to the colonial/Orientalist archives in order to relay history from an interstitial cultural location in the present. The mutual imbrication of the gaze and enunciation – and the potential of a *returned* look and response – are central issues. The paper discusses the use of multiple linguistic registers, intertextuality, and themes of travel and desire. I conclude that while Djebar favours models of ambivalent affiliation, Soueif insists upon productive connections across time and between "the Arab world" and "the West".

### **Hagariad: Mohja Kahf Revoices Arab Myths**

Martina Noskova (Masaryk University)

In *The Hajar Poems* the Arab American Muslim writer Mohja Kahf explores the other side of the scriptural story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. It is presented mainly from the perspective of Hagar, the mother of Arabs, but both genders and all conflicting sides are voiced. The paper analyses different spatial and temporal settings of individual Kahf's poems; these fluid environments support anti-pompous treatments of archetypal heroines and heroes, which is Kahf's major achievement in fighting stereotypes within

the Arab community itself. Along with Laurence Coupe's idea that myth is always in the process of being recreated, I argue that Kahf through her transcultural and timeless writing recreates the story of Hagar who speaks and stands for major *and* minor (Arab / Arab American / transatlantic) wo/men and thus creates a new non-restrictive myth according to which people might live in today's world.

### **Artist Among the Missing: Olivia Manning and the Palestine Mandate**

Eve Patten (University of Dublin Trinity College)

Over a quarter of a century after Said's *Orientalism*, critical uncertainties about the binary construction of his thesis persist. One means of pursuing those uncertainties is to trace the work of exiled British novelists working between the polarities of East and West, during and after the Second World War. How, from this interstitial perspective, did they query traditions of British-Arab cultural portraiture against a backdrop of unravelling British-Arab political relations in the period? In this paper I shall suggest that one such writer, novelist Olivia Manning, systematically exposes the obsolescence of British representation and image in the context of increasing diplomatic tension surrounding the Palestine Mandate.

The following abstract will be read by proxy if time allows:

### **Feminism Falling Short: Reading Muslims in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane***

Wendy O'Shea-Meddour (St. Hilda's College Oxford)

The reception of Ali's debut novel was in many ways more interesting than the novel itself. Read as a sort of Berlitzer travel guide, it was praised for making a previously "invisible" Muslim community "visible" and for providing insights into Islam. Virtually all discussions of the novel hinged on the outdated assumption that the text was a transparent medium through which the "experience" of Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants could be "captured". What was going on? This talk examines why the text provoked such conservative readings and attempts a more sophisticated analysis by focusing on melodrama, satire, intertextuality and the role of Western feminism.