

Book Review

Politics and Palestinian Literature in Exile: Gender, Aesthetics and Resistance in the Short Story, by Joseph R. Farag. 2016. London: I.B. Tauris. 304 pages.

Communities are constituted as imaginary in the sense that they require a notion of themselves (whether this notion is conscious or unconscious). Literature is one realm in which the imaginary manifests as a community constituting a unified entity with certain practices. In communities in crises, like in the case of Palestine, the imaginary of the place and its relationship to memory takes centre stage. Joseph Farag's book, *Politics and Palestinian Literature in Exile: Gender, Aesthetics and Resistance in the Short Story*, offers a thought-provoking exploration of the intricate relationship between politics, gender, aesthetics, and resistance in Palestinian literature. Through his meticulous analysis of selected short stories, Farag sheds light on the complexities of the Palestinian experience in exile and the ways in which literature becomes a powerful tool for expressing the imaginary as a way of preserving cultural memory and identity. The book covers trends and developments in the Palestinian short story written by authors in exile, i.e. outside the territory of historic Palestine, from the period immediately following the fall of Palestine in 1948 until the period immediately preceding the Oslo Accords of 1993. The book is divided into three main parts or chapters reflecting the time span that covers what may be considered three key politico-historical junctures in modern Palestinian history: the 1948 *Nakba* ('catastrophe'), the *Naksa* ('setback') of 1967 and the first *Intifada* ('uprising' [literally shaking off]) that erupted in 1987.

Farag's central argument revolves around the idea that Palestinian literature in exile is deeply entrenched in politics: it is simply the product of political struggles and resistance to the ongoing occupation of Palestine. As such, the book engages with the debates around the question of the committed art vs the experimental and cultural forms of production shaped by gender dynamics and aesthetic considerations. Farag explores this argument through a comparative study and detailed examination of various short stories written by Palestinian authors in exile, shedding light on the complexities of the writers' experiences and the ways in which they navigate their identity and resistance within the constraints of their chosen literary form, i.e. the short story. The writer's choice of the short story as his focus of analysis has proven to be quite pertinent given the laudable explanation he offers in the introduction and the first section of Chapter One on the generic considerations related to the tropes and themes of Palestinian literary production in the period under study. Farag explains how the short story or what he refers to in the introduction as "the neglected sibling of the novel", seems to be the most appropriate form that could articulate the Palestinian experience of the *Nakba* and the subsequent turbulence that followed over several decades. Thus, in choosing to focus on the short story, rather

than longer narrative forms such as the novel, Farag seems to be giving voice to “minor” forms of writing, to use the famous Deleuzian and Guattarian term, in a more predominantly literary realm where the canonical “major” form of the novel traditionally takes the lead. Moreover, the choice of Palestinian literature in exile fills a gap in Palestinian literary studies which traditionally valorizes the works of Palestinian writers in occupied Palestine itself.

One of the strengths of Farag's book is his meticulous study and analyses of the selected short stories. On the question of gender, for instance, the book charts articulation of feminist, gender, and nationalist concerns in the writings of Samīrah ‘Azzām (1927-1967) situating her oeuvre within the Palestinian literary canon and arguing through a series of close readings of her short stories that her writings are in fact seminal. Writing in the wake of the Nakbah (1948), ‘Azzām, Farag argues, was among the first to articulate many of the tropes and motifs that would become central to Palestinian literary production in later decades. He shows that despite her overriding concern with class critique, ‘Azzām's writing simultaneously prefigures later Palestinian feminist literary social critiques. In so doing, he compares her short stories to her contemporary, Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972) while proceeds to examine the works of prominent female authors, such as Sahar Khalifeh and Liana Badr, underscoring the crucial role played by gender in shaping the aesthetics and resistance strategies employed in the works of these contemporary Palestinian women writers.

Farag's deft movement between the sociopolitical realities of the Palestinians in historic Palestine and in the diaspora, and the literary and aesthetic analyses of the selected short stories from the early post-Nakba period through the first intifada, enable us to explore the nuances of Palestinian literary production guarding against a monolithic representation of this rich literary tradition. The discussion of Kanafani's short stories is a case in point. Through analyzing a number of short stories belonging to the two phases in Kanafani's literary output (post-*Nakba* and post-*Naksa* phases respectively), Farag shows how Kanafani in the first phase goes against the grain, pioneering modernist literary devices such as abstraction and interrupted temporal and spatial flows, thus offering us fragmented narratives in the period preceding 1967, which seems commensurate with the Palestinian nation's state of fragmentation and dispersal. In the second phase however, Farag observes that in his short stories and novellas, Kanafani significantly reverted to conventional, realist narrative in the period following 1967 until his assassination in 1972.

One other strength of Joseph Farag's book is his attentiveness to the question of gaps, literal and metaphorical, as discerned in his short literary and historical account of the Palestinian short story. Farag's choice of Kanafani's “*An al-rijāl wa-albanādiq*” (On men and guns) is significant as the collection deals with the central theme of the gap between what he calls the “Generation of the Catastrophe” and post-Nakba generations of young Palestinians who condone all forms of resistance including armed resistance. On a more literal and aesthetic level, Farag shows particular sensitivity towards forms of gaps of silences in the texts he analyzes. While in Chapter One he attempts to explain the “strategies of silences” in ‘Azzam's texts,

whereby he notices a total absence of any overt reference to the Nakba, he discerns in Chapter Three the contradiction and difference between the short stories of Ibrahim Nasrallah who demonstrated “an uncanny prescience” of the outbreak of the Intifada and Liana Badr’s total silence over the Intifada in her writings.

This characteristic of Farag’s critique, i.e. allowing literature to be read and articulated in terms of its absences and spaces of contradiction is what makes Farag’s approach unique and aligns him more with the work of Pierre Macherey, notably his seminal work, *Towards a Theory of Literary Production* (1966), where he recommends a reading of literary texts with an eye on marking spaces in literary products where ideology becomes visible.

The final section of Farag’s book would seem at first glance to be irrelevant to the main argument. However, in view of the overall intention of the book (filling a knowledge gap in Palestinian studies), Farag’s final thoughts on the teaching of Palestinian literature in western universities and the inclusion of Palestinian studies within the discipline of the Humanities in general and English Literature departments in particular are a propitious welcome and a much-needed scholarly effort done from within the framework of decolonial pedagogy. Read and studied in tandem with other subaltern forms of cultural productions and other ethnic literary experiences like that of the Native Americans, Farag’s book on Palestinian literature ultimately contributes to a decolonial paradigm of world literature.

References

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Faten Morsy *

* Professor of Comparative Literature, Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt
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