

**Popular Fiction, Translation and the Nahda in Egypt. Samah Selim (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). Pp. 243. \$84.99 cloth. ISBN: 9783030203610**

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In May 1881, a historian and newspaper editor named Muhammad ‘Abduh published an article in Egypt’s national gazette, *al-Waqa’i al-Misriyya*, on the subject of books. As the publishing industry in Egypt flourished, the future Grand Mufti took it upon himself to teach readers how to distinguish between the texts now on offer in the literary market. In particular, he was at pains to differentiate between, on the one hand, edifying literature (from Fénelon’s *Télémaque* to the Arabic fable collection *Kalila wa Dimna*) and on the other, a dangerous new wave of meretricious and superstitious texts (including folk histories about pre-Islamic figures such as ‘Antara al-‘Abbasi and dubiously scientific studies of evil spirits and jinn). These ambiguous boundaries between “good” and “bad” books, as erected by ‘Abduh and others during the 19th and early 20th-century period known as the Arab Nahda or “awakening,” take center stage in Samah Selim’s powerful and richly comprehensive *Popular Fiction, Translation and the Nahda in Egypt*. Reading translated fiction from the journal *Musamarat al-Sha‘b* (*The People’s Entertainments*) alongside a wide array of additional sources, Selim sidelines the realist national novel whose origin-story once dominated modern Arabic literary studies. Instead, she presents a corpus of translated or, to use her term, “adapted” popular fiction as the forgotten prehistory of modern Arabic literature. Through acute analysis of “non-elite” translation practices, which Selim argues subverted the liberal reformist and proto-nationalist discourses that coalesced in the Nahda period and have become synonymous with it, *Popular Fiction* proposes a profound re-assessment of the category “*nahda*” itself.

Central to Selim’s argument is the definition of two terms that sometimes seem inescapable in discussions of the Nahda: “modernity” and “translation.” For Selim, these terms are inextricably linked. She proposes that Nahda reformist discourses mobilized a concept of translation rooted in Romantic distinctions between originals and copies to portray modernity as a cultural problem, articulated as a binary of authenticity versus imitation or Westernization. By focusing only on the cultural dimensions of imperialism, such paradigms masked the massive transformation in social relations taking place as Egypt was incorporated into a capitalist world economy. Scholars such as Stephen Sheehi, Elizabeth Holt, and Nadia Bou Ali have in recent years called attention to the ways in which capitalist economic transformations shaped Nahda literary production, and Selim’s intervention affirms what might be considered a materialist turn in Nahda studies. However, *Popular Fiction* resists the temptation to render the period’s often-contradictory texts and voices too coherent, drawing attention to spaces of challenge, subversion, and play carved out beneath the dominant discourses. Although the “popular” translated fictions on which the book focuses are identified as a product of 19th-century commodity or mass culture, and their thematization of juridical discourses or new financial institutions is discussed in detail, Selim insists on these texts’ capacity not only to reproduce but also to reveal and to critique the material circumstances shaping them.

She therefore develops a case for expanding the study of modern Arabic literary production to encompass not only a neglected corpus of translated texts, but also new approaches to translation itself. Translation’s role in the origin-story of the realist Arabic novel has, she argues, either been strategically neglected in order to foreground the genre’s indigeneity or treated as a “symptom” of colonial trauma (p. 25). Meanwhile, European genre fiction (crime, romance, etc.)—which Selim, carefully distinguishing it from other popular cultural practices, here refers to as “popular” literature—was historically dismissed in Arabic as lowbrow and excessively Western and has also been sidelined in literary scholarship. In fact, scholarly attention to serialized and translated Arabic genre fiction has increased in recent years, but certainly no systematic survey of these texts and journals has yet been produced. Selim therefore provides a detailed overview of key texts, authors, and journals before elucidating some of the differences she proposes between “elite” translation practices of the time, and the creative, flexible, non-official “adaptations” with which she is concerned.

Selim gestures at points towards the instability, during the Nahda itself, of the distinction between “elite” and “popular” literature on which her own argument rests. This ambiguity is elaborated further in her discussion of the book’s main source, the popular journal *The People’s Entertainments* (*Musamarat al-Sha’b*). On the one hand, the journal’s publisher and editor Khalil Sadiq was a well-known political reformist, whose printing press also published some major reformist texts, some in translation. On the other, Selim argues, he expressed a vision of translation inseparable from the notion of text as mass commodity, in which author and translator were mere temporary “owners” of a continually circulating object. Interpreting Sadiq’s vision as a modern reframing of the long history of authorless Arabic *qiṣaṣ*, Selim shows that it is possible to read the journal’s adaptations both as part of the emergence of mass culture and as an iteration of existing popular practices.

Selim prefaces her examination of these adaptations with a more detailed study of “elite” reformist literary production, through a close reading of Muhammad al-Muwailiḥi’s *Ḥadīth ‘Isa ibn Hisham* (What ‘Isa ibn Hisham Told Us). Implicitly to present an idiosyncratic work like *Ḥadīth ‘Isa* as an exemplar of Nahda reformism is an unusual choice, but Selim’s reading is compelling. Focusing on a set of themes already identified as central to popular fiction in the period (gender and sexuality, juridical discourses of identity, and the modern city), Selim argues that *Ḥadīth ‘Isa* makes deception and illusionism central to its critique of modernity. However, it also performs feats of illusion itself, consistently reformulating the 19th century’s altered social relations as the result not of imperial capitalism but simply “Westernization,” and its economic transformations as cultural shifts, obfuscating the real forces at work.

It is precisely this kind of obfuscation that is resisted, according to Selim, in the adaptations published in *The People’s Entertainments*. In the book’s second half, Chapters 5 through 8 each take up one of the aforementioned themes, exploring how the journal’s author-adaptors transform “original” fictions to produce texts that are generically novel and, sometimes, newly self-reflexive and critical. Serious attention is given not only to the translations’ literary-linguistic context, but that of the French or English versions, making for particularly rich comparative analysis. Chapter 5, for instance, explores how understudied authors such as Esther Moyal and Niqula Haddad negotiated liberal reformist articulations of the New Woman and rising female readership. Their translations and pseudo-translations redirect narratives of corruption through consumption in which female characters were caught, sometimes by mobilizing older Arabic popular fictional motifs. Chapter 6 reads translations of Maurice Leblanc’s *Arsène Lupin* stories against the rise of criminology and the emergence of juridical concepts of personhood in France and Egypt. Gentleman-thief Lupin, Selim argues, became a compelling anti-hero in Arabic: his deceptions and disguises recalled the heroes of medieval Arabic romances, and troubled new notions of fixed and surveillable identity.

Recurring themes of secrecy and conspiracy come to fruition in the final chapter, where translations of French mystery fiction connect the economic and legal transformations in Egypt touched on separately thus far. Tracing the ways in which texts’ original authors were erased or obscured in their Arabic manifestations, Selim identifies an opportunistic attitude to authorship that stood in contradistinction to new articulations of intellectual property, and asks how portrayals of financial corruption and crime responded to a rise in speculative financial institutions in Egypt under the jurisdiction of its reformed court system. The epilogue elegantly expands this field of inquiry, turning to the author’s own encounters with mystification and deception during the course of her research in the public institutions of the post-colonial state.

The epilogue serves in fact to highlight *Popular Fiction*’s own unusual generosity and transparency with regards to its source material. Selim both reiterates calls for crowd-sourced and radically open archival practice in the Middle East and answers them in her detailed appendix, which lists the titles, authors and translators of every novel published in *The People’s Entertainments*. The book’s combination of empirical breadth and theoretical nuance is also rare, offering an example of literary scholarship that is thoroughly comparative without sacrificing historical specificity and detail. To read literary texts in the light of the forces that shaped them without reducing them to products of those forces is an approach that seems particularly suited to the genre-fluid and politically complex cultural production of the Nahda. Methodologically as well as in terms of content, therefore, this book has much to offer intellectual, cultural, and social historians of the modern Middle East and particularly of the Nahda period, as well as students and scholars of modern Arabic literature.

In *Popular Fiction*, Selim presents a nuanced study not so much of a neglected literary genre, but of the ways in which genre itself can function both as a gatekeeper and as a refuge. Like “modernity,” “genre” (particularly the genre of the novel) is a question that has dominated modern Arabic literary studies for at least the past two decades. Selim elucidates both concepts with force and perhaps even a certain finality, in a book that insistently gestures towards further avenues for exploration. Her epilogue begins to tease out the relationship between Arabic fiction and the post/colonial archive; other chapters touch on the many ways in which legal, literary, and economic discourses and practices inform one another, or nod to the connections between literatures within and across the Global South as well as between European and Arabic texts. *Popular Fiction*’s rich contribution to modern Arabic literary scholarship lies not only in its thorough investigation of the field’s presiding problems, but its detection of some exciting new ones.

doi:10.1017/S0020743820000501

**Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic.**  
**Narges Bajoghli (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019). Pp. 176.**  
**\$22.00 paper. ISBN: 9781503610293**

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Narges Bajoghli’s *Iran Reframed* shifts our analytical gaze toward negotiations over representation and power within the core of what she calls “pro-regime” media producers, those who work to maintain the Islamic Republic, with differences over the kinds and degrees of reforms that need to be achieved within it. The question of “how” these men strategize and work to keep alive a revolutionary system that has become the status-quo is at the center of this book’s discussion. Bajoghli rightly argues that the “pro-regime” category is fluid. And over the course of her five chapters she proceeds to demonstrate this fluidity via examinations of intergenerational fissures among pro-regime actors, cracks in the official narrative, demarcations of insider/outsider categories, varied strategies for reaching non-regime audiences, and the recasting of revolutionary ideology within nationalist as opposed to religious terms.

More than forty years into the Islamic Republic, *Iran Reframed* is the first book-length ethnographic study in English on pro-regime media producers, and the reason is obvious. One of this book’s achievements is its access alone. In a captivating section, Bajoghli describes how she won sympathy with these men—and this book is about the *men* of this story—through a 4-year process that included her making a film about war veterans affected by chemical weapons, and ultimately, by letting down her guard and revealing to them her family’s complicated political history, one that would naturally place her outside of their “insider” circle. On her mother’s side there had been high-ranking members in the Shah’s government, and it was her father’s leftist activism that had led the family to emigrate from Iran. This tactic seems to have worked and over time she was “adopted” by Mr. Hosseini (not his real name), an older Revolutionary Guard member who is a leader in the regime media world, his friend Mr. Ahmadi, also a producer, and Mostafa, a *basiji* (paramilitary volunteer) and emerging pro-regime filmmaker. It is through the access that they offer and their views that most of the book’s content—researched during President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s second term following the 2009 Green Uprising—is narrated. Indeed, it is the legitimacy crisis following 2009 that casts these pro-regime media makers into their challenging positions of creating content that upholds the state’s revolutionary ideology under evolving political, social, ideational circumstances.

And these changing circumstances are most evident in the body of the *basij* and the Revolutionary Guards themselves, a topic that Bajoghli is able to reveal in its human dimensions in her discussion on generational changes in Chapter 1. Through ethnographic research, she demonstrates the lack of