

WEN-CHIN OUYANG:

Poetics of Love in the Arabic Novel.

v, 298 pp. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012. £70. ISBN 978 0 7486 4273 1.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X13001122

This is the first of two volumes discussing, respectively, the poetics of love (2012) and the politics of nostalgia (2013) in the Arabic novel. Both books show the spirit of the author: a desire to penetrate the heart of the contrast among the three well-known paradoxes of the postcolonial cultural debate, according to which “authentic” is equivalent to “Egyptian” (or local), “modern” has the same value as “contrast with tradition”, and “world-wide” means “projected into the future”. The two subjects faced by the author in the volumes are fundamental in Arabic literary history, where love and nostalgia have been pregnant since the times of pre-Islamic poetry. Moreover, in her study of stories based on the two tropes of love and nostalgia, Wen-chin Ouyang examines how the present mobilizes the past in the process of constructing and modernizing the Arab nation (p. 26).

As Wen-chin Ouyang explains (p. 26), the idea of writing about the poetics of love and the politics of nostalgia in the Arabic novel is connected with the alternative visions among Arab intellectuals about those subjects. The authentication of modern fiction and the legitimacy of modernity are shown by the author to be a basic need among modern Arab writers and critics, absorbing them in their continuous dialogue between past and present. She explains (p. 27) that her final aim is to offer a good number of pertinent readings, taken from a number of Arabic novels centred on the role of tradition and the problems of a dialogue with it. But she seeks also to re-examine the way of reading texts and writing literary criticism on the modern Arabic novel, facing the real difficulty of how to determine its cross-cultural genesis and clear up its identity.

In her analysis Ouyang underlines a number of aspects of the same problem, which she summarizes as follows: 1) research into the origin and genealogy of Arabic fiction in general and of the Arabic novel in particular; 2) the need for a definition of the Arabic novel; 3) the tensions which are perceived in the actions of both traditional and modernist cultural politics; 4) the role of nationalism in identity politics; 5) the necessity for legitimacy and authentication of the literary genre of the novel. Adopting an interesting approach the author dwells also on the triangle nation–modernity–tradition and on the impact that love for the Arab Nation has had on the way in which modern Arabic intellectuals write: they could feel nostalgia for or be in denial about their own past, but they always retain in their minds a kind of loving memory for it.

Ouyang’s research methods are rigorous and draw on a good range of documentary sources. The bibliography is well focused and up-to-date. The large number of quoted passages and writers under discussion confirm her deep knowledge of Arabic literature.

The author divides her volume into three parts, each consisting of two chapters and a number of sub-chapters. The first part is devoted to the development of the concept of nation in the Arabic novel. The author puts in evidence the politics of mobility (place, space, text) making a nation, and underlines the complex boundaries that tie up nationalistic ideologies with literary experience. The second part is devoted to an analysis of love for the nation, love that is similar to love for an unquiet passionate lover. The author also inquires about the moods of answering

to the various questions put by the Arabic novel about the problems of the legitimacy of political power. The codes of conduct for the ruler and ruled are analysed in the light of *The Thousand and One Nights* and of the allegory *Layālī alf layla* by Naguib Mahfouz, to put in evidence the possibility of improper use of power on the part of the state. The third part explores the subject of desire in modern Arab history, essentially with two objectives: decolonization and modernization. Indeed Ouyang's attention dwells upon the intersection between the two impulses (decolonization and modernization), which provoke a strong impact in modern Arabic literary expression. A deep analysis of the nostalgic impulse present in the Arabic novel shows how the Arab nation has sometimes been oppressed by its own past. However, according to the author (p. 274), desire and utopia are necessary to imagine and develop a plausible society and a modern structure moving towards its autonomous configuration. Moreover, in the complexity of elements like desire, love and nostalgia, the role of women is also underlined as essential in the literary genre of the novel, in both its symbolic and its concrete or physical functions (pp. 249–53).

The epilogue to the volume opens with a quotation from David Lowenthal, pertinent to the spirit of Wen-chin Ouyang's analysis: "The past is everywhere ... whether it is celebrated or rejected, attended to or ignored, the past is omnipresent" (p. 273). In her conclusion the author underlines, once again, how the persistent ambivalence of positions regarding the formation of the nation and the acceptance of modernity in modern Arab culture reflect themselves also in the modern Arabic novel, sometimes revived to legitimize the foundation of the future, sometimes surpassed to avoid previous errors. According to the author, this is an enormous paradox denoting great uncertainty about the future. In fact, she writes: "Nostalgia at once imprisons the present in the past and distorts the past, making it impossible for the present and future to have the freedom they need to take their own shape" (pp. 273–4).

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x, 246 pp. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. £70. ISBN 978 0 7486 5569 4.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X13001110

In this volume Wen-chin Ouyang, discussing the theme of the politics of nostalgia in the Arabic novel, analyses some typical phenomena of the post-modern period based on "a new understanding of the past" (p. 225). In fact she goes on to inquire about the discourse of the Arabic novel on modernization, and focuses particularly on the subjects of nostalgia and madness. She examines the ways in which this literary genre looks at the present through the lens of the past, nostalgically reviving the tradition and rewriting it in a dialectic discourse. In the light of the strong contrasts suffered by the Arab literary world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries until today, she underlines some paradoxical aspects of the "new" attitude, showing how easily the past tradition can become a burden for the present, when nation building and modernization come face to face with insurmountable political realities. However, she also admits that heritage can be the first step towards linking tradition with modernity and towards building a new postcolonial national identity (p. 225).