

function of the immense fertility of the Gangetic plain, the abundant availability of labour, and the relative ease of transportation, so that living standards in India more or less matched those in Iran. Comparing flat, densely populated, urbanized Holland during its Golden Age to Safavid Iran is inherently precarious, but it can be said that the average Isfahani household enjoyed a lifestyle comparable to that of the inhabitants of the relatively poor eastern provinces of Holland, with the understanding that we know almost nothing about the cost of clothing, household appliances, rents and repairs.

The book ends with an effort to chart developments over time. We learn from this that some prices went up but that, overall, there was little inflation so that life did not become markedly more expensive between *c.* 1640 and 1700.

This is a useful study, showing what can be done with limited sources but also how difficult it is to arrive at meaningful conclusions on the basis of those same sources. The author could have teased out more information from travel accounts, missionary sources and VOC records from the period after 1700; and extending his chronological purview beyond the Safavids while integrating the available scholarship on the period's monetary system might have given him a better sense of both long-term eating habits and price trends. Still, he has done an admirable job mapping living conditions in seventeenth-century Iran.

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FABIO CAIANI and CATHERINE COBHAM:

The Iraqi Novel: Key Writers, Key Texts.

xiv, 264 pp. (Edinburgh Studies in Modern Arabic Literature.)

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This book is part of a series whose major ambition is to position modern Arabic literature not only within a more global context of what we have increasingly labelled comparative or world literature, but within a wider public readership. To focus on the evolution of the modern Iraqi novel in particular, young as it may be, helps map out major political anxieties and aesthetic orientations formed and continuously in formation by a fluid history of transformation, and by a contingent shattering and dislocating of the Iraqi identity. On this account, fiction becomes the prism through which we can trace, account for, and pin down the development of a curious auto/biographical relationship between modern Iraqi writing and history.

From the very outset, Caiani and Cobham have underscored their methodological choice: to look at “formative” short stories of the 1940s and 1950s by deploying a close and comparative examination of the texts. The authors’ approach stays away from a “macro” descriptive and exhaustive treatment of Iraqi fiction; it invests its scrutiny more judiciously in understanding the dynamic interface between the text, culture and society. This seems to be an important pedagogical departure from the few studies which already exist, especially on Iraqi literature.

The clear rationale in selecting the texts of ‘Abd al-Malik Nūrī, Ghā’ib Ṭu’ma Farmān, Mahdī ‘Īsā al-Ṣaqr and Fu’ād al-Takarlī depends on the assessment of these works as serious departures in aesthetic innovation and maturity. This study is divided into eight chapters that have a more or less coherent and consistent

line of argumentation. Whilst Mahdī 'Īsā al-Ṣāqr's work, for example, reflects a polyphonic experimentation in the genre of what the authors call social realism, Fu'ād al-Takarlī's work is further complicated by an under-examined depth that places his literary distinction beyond national boundaries. This is indeed the "1950 Generation" of Iraqi writers slowly moving away from the self-assured cultural groundedness and thickness of classic poetry into the alluring newness of fiction, which has now begun to shape the consciousness of the emerging modern nation state. Caiani's and Cobham's analysis proceeds with meticulous attention to the historical and artistic circumstances of these texts tracing and showing significant cultural and ideological shifts, literary cross-fertilization with other Arab and European traditions and significant political moments. The authors have determinedly stressed the very mixed and "raw" ingredients and details that may have made the act of fictional writing perceivable, graspable and possible in the first place.

Caiani and Cobham argue that the development of Iraqi fiction has ostensibly been a matter of gradual maturation; its growth has been a long, uneven yet self-fashioning process, whose transitoriness is conditioned mainly by the experiences of war, violence, tragedy and exile. This can be seen from the didactic and schematized style of the early fiction, with its preoccupation with recasting classical literary forms, to the elaborations of the novella, short story, and then the novel with its multi-layered explorations of new "exilic" themes and aesthetic devices. Nūrī's short stories, for example, move away from autobiographic to lyrical and evocative style, especially his short story, *Faṭṭūma*. This has given rise to uneven types of narrative techniques or metafictional irony, as in the case of al-Takarlī, or the use of internal and external dialogues as in the case of al-Ṣāqr. Farmān on the other hand experiments with literary realism as defined by Auerbach, especially in his novel *Nakhla*, to negotiate issues of colonial and postcolonial spaces, and the quotidian tensions characters face in the conflict between modernity and tradition. Baghdad or Basra become not just mere geographies but also constitute images, ideas, memories, melodies and imaginaries. Farmān further alludes to classic storytelling, *film noir*, autobiography, or even reportage, whose driving function in his fiction seems to be to build "imagined" and alternative spaces; to "document" Iraq's national *becoming*.

In the end the Iraqi novel's journey consists more of attempts to achieve resolutions to real conundrums and riddles in love, injustice, deceit, alienation and exile. In other words, as the authors concede, many of these "modernistic" tendencies, or let's say stylistic choices (at times competing ones), should be read in light of the major "secular" affiliations of the writers themselves, their intellectual and physical mobility and displacement. Stylistic ripeness is always circumstantially conditioned. Caiani and Cobham's close analysis of these texts teases out "the universal validity" of such experiments, and the founding affect – ignored as it may have been by other studies – that these novelists have had on a later generation of writers.

Perhaps the major merit of this book is the fact that it brings a degree of rigour to the analysis of this selection of texts by allowing them to speak and articulate the changes happening inside and outside their boundaries. To demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between the text and its multiple contexts and anxieties of influence, and its multiple dislocations, is a welcome pedagogical move that would help students of modern Arabic literature and new scholars appreciate more closely how the dynamic duality of "home" and "exile" or specificity and universality has subtly operated in the case of the Iraqi novel.

Yet this book uncovers only the tip of an iceberg of a variety of topics and studies that are yet to be fully explored by scholars of Arabic literature. Not only is there more work to be done on the legacy of the 1950 generation, but there is perhaps an exigent need to excavate more writers, especially women writers whose

perspectives would heighten, clarify and evidence the degree of aesthetic and thematic polyphony so characteristic of the modern Iraqi novel. Such study, for example, would even benefit from theoretical elaborations from such fields as post-colonial studies and cultural theory. Considering the current gaps in scholarship, especially in the field of Iraqi literature, *The Iraqi Novel: Key Writers, Key Texts* is a serious addition, and likely to become a solid point of departure for more specialists to begin and complete further scholarly contributions.

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YASIR SULEIMAN:

Arabic in the Fray: Language Ideology and Cultural Politics.

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There are many ways to deal with Arabic. One is the descriptive and structural approach. This, in Suleiman's opinion, misses the link to "a rich canvas of political impulses and meanings in society" (p. 150). A different approach, represented in the book under review, is to study Arabic in its social context. The volume is the fourth of a planned pentalogy on language and society in the Arabophone world. The preceding three volumes were dedicated respectively to the use of Arabic in constructing pan-Arabist and national ideologies (*The Arabic Language and National Identity*, Washington, 2003); to the conflict between dialects and standard language (*A War of Words*, Cambridge, 2004); to the relationship between individual identity, group identity and conflict (*Arabic, Self and Identity*, New York and Oxford, 2011). *Arabic in the Fray* deals with identity and conflict in society and the way "they are manifested through debates about language in the political, cultural and theological spheres" (p. 1). The core concept around which the book revolves is the symbolic role of language in society. This is a touchy issue for any language, much more so for Arabic, and it is therefore a very sensible idea to dig into the symbolic role of Arabic in the pre-modern and modern periods.

The principles underpinning this essay, summarized in the introduction, are the distinction between the instrumental and the symbolic role of language, the recognition of language as a proxy for other issues of concern in society, and the nature of data ("second order meta-linguistic views, discussions or debates", p. 5). Accordingly, the arrangement is thematic and not chronological. This does not exclude a diachronic perspective: moving back and forth along the time line (see e.g. ch. 2) the author emphasizes the infrastructural continuities across time. The methodology adopted combines traditional scholarship based on a thorough and careful reading of the texts and qualitative investigation.

The volume is organized in five chapters, the first having an introductory nature and the remaining four being organized around core issues like identity, ideology, cultural politic and language cognition. Chapter 1, "Language construction and language symbolism", pinpoints the different roles of language and argues that language is a fact of construction supported by ideologies. The role of standardization, in both language and script, is treated with a wealth of examples of diverse countries (e.g. Greece, Turkey, Spain, Italy, Belgium) with a special focus on the Arabophone world, where Arabic is seen as a tool for constructing national identities.