Readings in Syrian Prison Literature: The Poetics of Human Rights. R. Shareah Taleghani (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2021). Pp. 270. $80.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780815637066

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Readings in Syrian Prison Literature is a timely, compassionate, and incisive work of literary scholarship, arriving at the end of a decade marked by new nadirs of mass incarceration, forced disappearance, torture, and executions in Syria since the revolution of 2011. Taleghani's corpus is largely the product of an earlier moment of intensified imprisonment in Syria: the repression of the domestic left and Muslim Brotherhood opposition movements between the late 1970s and 1990s under President Hafez al-Assad, the father of Syria's current president, Bashar al-Assad. Taleghani skillfully interweaves past and post-2011 campaigns of incarceration without erasing the substantive distinctions between these two time periods, such as shifts in prison geography and uses, as well as the unprecedented scale of imprisonment since 2011. Multiple chapters open with reflections on events that propelled 2011's uprising (e.g., the imprisonment and torture of children in Daraʿa) and that have followed since, including the destruction by ISIS of the notorious Tadmur prison in 2015. This narrative structure to *Readings in Syrian Prison Literature* subtly tracks the weight of Syria's post-1970 carceral past on the present, as well as the ongoing negotiation of its meaning among writers and activists, the majority of whom now live outside Syria.

Taleghani's knowledgeable study will introduce the reader to the remarkable networks—traversing texts, generations, and shared experiences of incarceration and creation—that characterize Syrian and Arabic prison literatures as a transnational scene. The author draws on interviews with writers and close textual readings of their works, contextualized with accounts of their imprisonments, translations, and views on their own activities. As a result, the reader meets Syrian prison authors as writers, but also as the theorists and critics of the prison literature genre (*adab al-sujūn*), which Taleghani traces back to initial uses in the early 1970s (although she is careful to note previous instances of writing about incarceration in Syrian letters). Authors introduce and frame the reception of new prison literature voices; take critical distance from their predecessors and the very genre of prison literature; and create neologisms that, in turn, act as points of debate and theorization (e.g., *al-istiḥbās*, derived from *ḥ-b-s* for prison). The connections Taleghani maps take on particular significance today, after the events of 2011 moved former prisoners of the 1980s to share their experiences (some for the first time) and made incarceration the focus of new activisms in regional writing and cultural production. In one striking moment, a prominent author and former prisoner of the 1980s generation, Ghassan al-Jibaʿi, whose short stories Taleghani analyzes in Chapter 3, reappears in the concluding Coda as a guest actor in a contemporary film (*Ladder to Damascus,* dir. Muhammad Malas, 2013). Al-Jibaʿi plays the formerly imprisoned father of a young woman who has committed suicide. The blurred line between his cinematic interviews and public status as a former prisoner is an example of the self-aware attention to the act of narrating incarceration that pervades Taleghani's readings and that she dubs "carceral metafiction": "a borderline discourse" that interrogates the space between "fiction and criticism" to "expose the potential contradictions and erasures involved in written depictions of the lived experience of detention" (p. 157).

Such metafictional acts form Taleghani's foundation for reading prison literature alongside the post-1960s experimental turn in the Arabic-language novel. This gesture is supported by the fact that pioneering modernist novels like Sonallah Ibrahim's *Tilka al-Raʾiha* (*That Smell,* 1966) explicitly treat detention. Through her readings (primarily in poetry and the short story), Taleghani successfully presents a corpus that is fiercely committed to describing injustices witnessed and experienced, all while drawing metapoetic and metanarrative attention to the limitations of language, fragmentations of voice, and (uniquely) the connection of the injured subject to others. Taleghani does not impose this innovative reading on the corpus: her authors had already placed the potent hold of social realism on Syrian

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literature, including on incarceration, into their literary past of "prison ideology" (p. 171). She is in turn freed to traverse, rather than reify, the traditional boundary of prison literature studies: a documentary-testimonial genre can "also" be aesthetic.[1] In an intriguing moment in the introduction, Taleghani suggests a tie between political oppression and the post-1960s experiment that would place prison literature at the very heart of metafiction and modernism in Arabic:

> [The] turn toward a conscious or self-reflexive manipulation of literary forms via the uses of historiographic metafiction, stream-of-consciousness narration, or cinematic realism has been engendered by systematic political oppression and, at least partially in certain foundational cases, I would argue, by the pervasive experience of political detention (p. 15).

Through the Syrian national case, Taleghani gestures in this direction, helped and only occasionally hindered by the human rights framing of the study. The question of how transparently language can render incarceration runs through the book but is most powerfully developed in readings of novelist Hasiba ʿAbd al-Rahman in Chapter 3 (on torture) and poet Faraj Bayraqdar and novelist Mustafa Khalifa in Chapter 5 (on Tadmur Prison), which explore language's flooding of the novel as form (discussed in relation to ʿAbd al-Rahman), the limitations of language in depictions of violence (discussed in relation to Bayraqdar), and thematics of withdrawal and silencing (discussed in relation to Khalifa). Taleghani turns such techniques against the emphasis on legibility in human rights narrative conventions. She attests not only to what aspects of carceral *experience* these conventions efface, but also to authors' representational concerns with a Syrian Guernica (p. 147) and historical truth; their feelings of responsibility to narrate; and their depictions of felt connection to various collectives (e.g., other detainees, historical Arab-Islamic communities) through incarceration.

In *Readings in Syrian Prison Literature,* human rights play multiple roles that Taleghani navigates with ethical nuance. Most centrally, human rights name a set of representational conventions around incarceration: mappings of prisons, lists of torture techniques, numbers of prisoners, measurements of cells, and so on. Reading prison literature against such conventions, Taleghani does not go so far as to suggest the Syrian corpus frames itself against, or subverts, them. Rather, her readings track representational convergences between the Syrian prison text and human rights norms before moving to close readings that uncover the complexities suppressed in the latter. Taleghani does not collapse these textual norms into a second, more conventional understanding of human rights, which primarily appears in the book's opening and closing sections: a flawed, unequal international system of standards and institutions whose failures on Syria since 2011 beggar belief. Acknowledging this critique, Taleghani refuses to dismiss a third, *aspirational* dimension of human rights as a project that provides common cause and legitimacy for individuals and groups engaged in political struggles—including against torture and incarceration—across the globe. The touch of these extratextual questions on Taleghani's literary readings remains light but can be perceived in her recurring claim that human rights *narrative* conventions, while seeking to document incarceration legibly, drown out the voices of the incarcerated (pp. 94, 98).

Some of Taleghani's strongest literary readings strain against the conceptual frame of human rights, as in her brilliant reading of torture in ʿAbd al-Rahman's novel, where pain becomes productive of a new subjectivity and an excess of language that floods the text, bringing much-needed development to decades of citations of Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*. Likewise, Taleghani's extended treatment of Jamil Hatmal, a lesser-known author in Syrian literary studies, uncovers a despairing narrative voice who (long before 2011) collapsed prison into exile and could not bring language to the threshold of reassembling the subject. At other moments, the stated difference of literary texts to human rights reports forecloses explorations that might have emerged from Taleghani's readings. Why, for example, does Syrian prison literature typically give detailed descriptions of prisons, even satellite imagery, only to turn abruptly away from place for the rest of narrative—and with what literary effects?

[1]Taleghani also reviews, then sets aside, anthropological terms of debate around Syrian prison literature established in the late 1990s and early 2000s by miriam cooke and Lisa Wedeen, in their respective studies of political culture under Hafez al-Assad, around *tanfis* (the letting off of steam) and complicities between the state and oppositional culture; 7–9 and 13.

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Another way to frame this point is through Taleghani's concluding gesture to literature as a source for a reinvigorated, imaginative human rights that—by necessity—must abandon the known terms of this field. She offers a vocabulary for this journey into newness in a brief citation from Pierre Nora: that each event "testifies not so much to what it represents as to what it reveals, not so much to what it is as to what it unleashes" (p. 87). The terrain is perhaps controversial, as it entails turning the gaze at least partially from prison literature's truth claims ("this really happened") to ask what incarceration has unleashed in and for Syrians, the incarcerated and the non-incarcerated, as well as other nationalities detained in Syrian prisons. Yet it echoes and expands Taleghani's opening speculation on prison literature at the heart of representing experiences of power. The drive to name not only the occurrence but the meaning of so much cruelty, and what remains possible in its aftermath, is particularly present in the works of Bayraqdar, a key figure for Taleghani's work. The author also explores this territory in her discussions of affective geographies, forms of life, and disrupted emotional lives (notably within families) of all those touched by incarceration, gesturing—in line with contemporary activism in the Syrian diaspora—to the effects of incarceration rippling out across society and over time.

Taleghani's book will become indispensable reading for undergraduate and graduate students and scholars of modern Syrian culture and politics, and of prison literature. While the work is most relevant to those with an interest in Arabic-language writings on incarceration, *Readings in Syrian Prison Literature* will lend itself to comparative and world literary perspectives thanks to its secondary literature bibliography, which runs from US/Latinx to Chinese prison literatures, and its critically-informed attention to US uses of Syria's prison archipelago for illegal extraditions. Taleghani's readings span works by leftist Syrian authors and by former prisoners accused of affiliation, or affiliated, with Islamist political movements, although questions of secularism and Islam do not play a central role. Taleghani's attention to gender—including writings by women, women's carceral experiences, and recurring uses of absent women in texts by male authors—while not a central analytical line, will nevertheless make the study relevant to those interested in learning more about gender and incarceration in Syria.

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In May 2021, after the umpteenth Israeli attempt to ethnically cleanse several families in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah and the repeated attacks against thousands of Muslim worshippers who were praying at the Al Aqsa Mosque during the last week of the holy month of Ramadan, Palestinians across historic Palestine revolted and engaged in different forms of resistance. From Yafa and Lod, through Jerusalem and the West Bank, to Gaza, together they defied the regime of spatial and political fragmentation imposed by the colonial authorities. Israel violently suppressed the new uprising and subjected the already devastated Gaza Strip to heavy bombardments which resulted in another round of systematic destruction and heavy civilian casualties. 242 Palestinians were killed during the 11 days of Israeli attack on Gaza, among them 66 children. According to the United Nations, 52,000 Palestinians were displaced, while nearly 450 buildings have been destroyed or badly damaged.[1] Amnesty International

[1]"U.N. agency says 52,000 displaced in Gaza, Amnesty wants war crimes investigation," Reuters, May 18, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/more-than-52000-palestinians-displacedgaza-un-aid-agency-2021-05-18/