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► **To cite this version:**

Annamaria Bianco. Moving Through Space, Sheltering Across Time: Alternate Realities in Contemporary Arabic Fiction of (Forced) Displacement. 2023. hal-04382760

HAL Id: hal-04382760

<https://hal.science/hal-04382760v1>

Submitted on 9 Jan 2024

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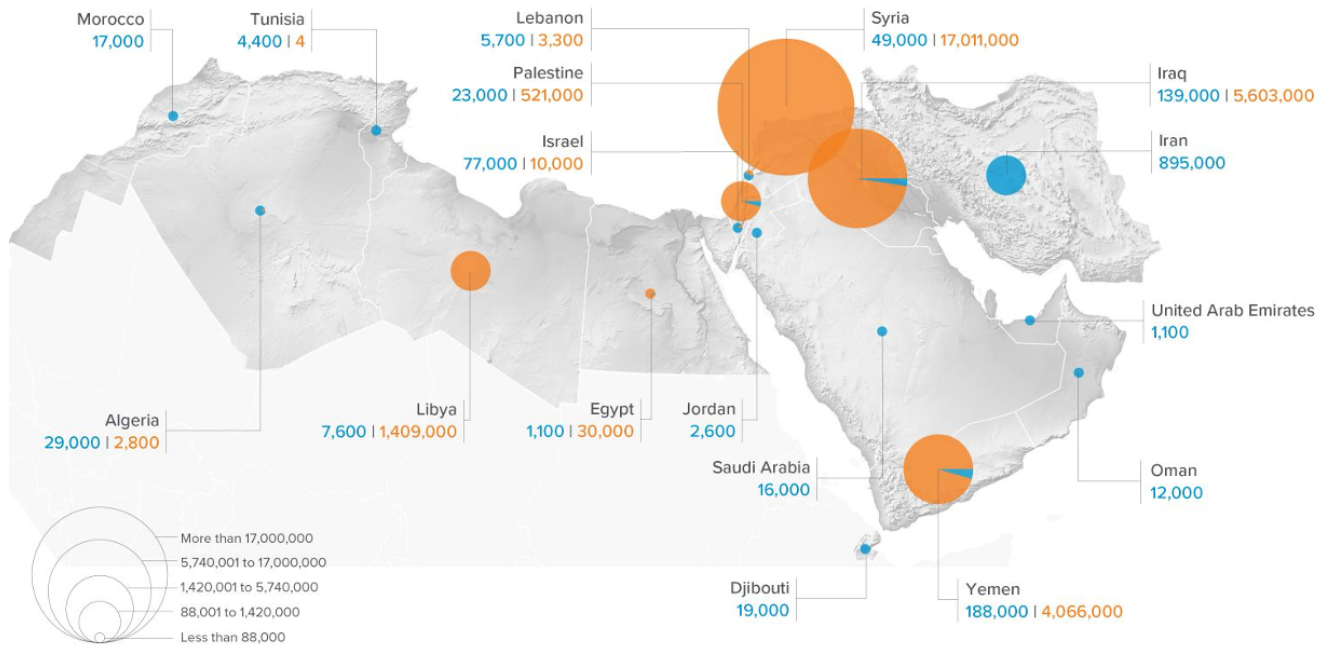
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Moving Through Space, Sheltering Across Time: Alternate Realities in Contemporary Arabic Fiction of (Forced) Displacement

VON FORUM TRANSREGIONALE STUDIEN · VERÖFFENTLICHT 27. APRIL 2023 · AKTUALISIERT 20. APRIL 2023

By Annamaria Bianco

At the time of the *Nahda*, the “Arab Renaissance” of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, travel and migration unquestionably marked the Arab world’s entry into modernity. Yet, the contemporary era seems to be even more characterised by the experience of mobility. If, on the one hand, this is certainly due to the rise of globalization; on the other hand, one should not forget the events that have shaped the history of North Africa and the Middle East since the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 (*al-Nakba*), such as conflicts, wars, and occupations. Since then, the MENA region has experienced several diaspora or mass migration phenomena, especially after the 2011 uprisings. The subsequent socio-political crises in Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and Sudan have contributed to an exponential increase in the number of displaced people in the world, amounting to 117.2 million people according to UNHCR data from 2023. A figure that becomes even higher if one considers the number of ‘illegal’ migrants worldwide, not registered by any official body. They are called “*harraga*” in the Maghreb, meaning “those who burn” (both distances and borders as well as their passports, or IDs).



The country and territory names and figures are shown only when the total new displacements value is major than zero, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures. Data consolidated by IDMC. Production date: 13/11/2020. The boundaries and the names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IDMC.

Figure 1 – New displacements by conflict and disasters between 2010 and 2019,

<https://story.internal-displacement.org/mena-2021/index.html>

This so-called “migratory crisis”, proclaimed about a decade ago and also known as “the refugee crisis”, has profoundly changed the characteristics of mobility as well as the imagery associated with it, both in Europe and in the MENA region. Also, it has had a major impact on contemporary Arab literary production. In this blog contribution, I will illustrate *how*, by focusing on the link between migration and time, especially when time is expressed in the future tense. By drawing on the studies of Johanna Sellman and Letizia Lombezzi, as well as on the notion of *refugeedom*, I will show how Arab “migration” writings[1] and future writings have increasingly intersected in the wake of the “speculative turn” in twenty-first century Arabic fiction to advocate for social and political change through the creation of alternative histories, parallel universes and other imagined realities. As we will see thanks to the selection of four different novels from Iraqi, Lebanese and Syrian writers, the authors of these literary genres juxtapose the documentary function of prose with narrative strategies of defamiliarization. By doing so, they aim to awaken in the reader the desire to act on the present, to rectify the past and change the future of hospitality, by upsetting the categories of migration dictated by the laws on international protection and showing the dark side of the Western asylum system. After reviewing the emergence of this trend and the development of Comma Press’ futuristic short story anthologies, I will focus on the functions of utopia and dystopia in two novels: Ali Bader’s *The Clouds Player* (2016) and Hoda Barakat’s *The Night Post* (2018). I will further dedicate a specific section to Syrian fiction, showing how the prolongation of the war has profoundly impacted the imagination of the authors and their hopes of homecoming, leading them to set their novels in catastrophic scenarios, such as in the examples of Ibrahim Al-Jabin’s *Aljamiado* (2022) and Nesrine Khoury’s

Wadi Qandil (2023). I will conclude my contribution with some reflections on the power of the alternative temporalities evoked by these works, speculating on the transformative role played by fiction.

Future Writing and “Migration” Writing: A Crossroads of Genres in Arabic Literature

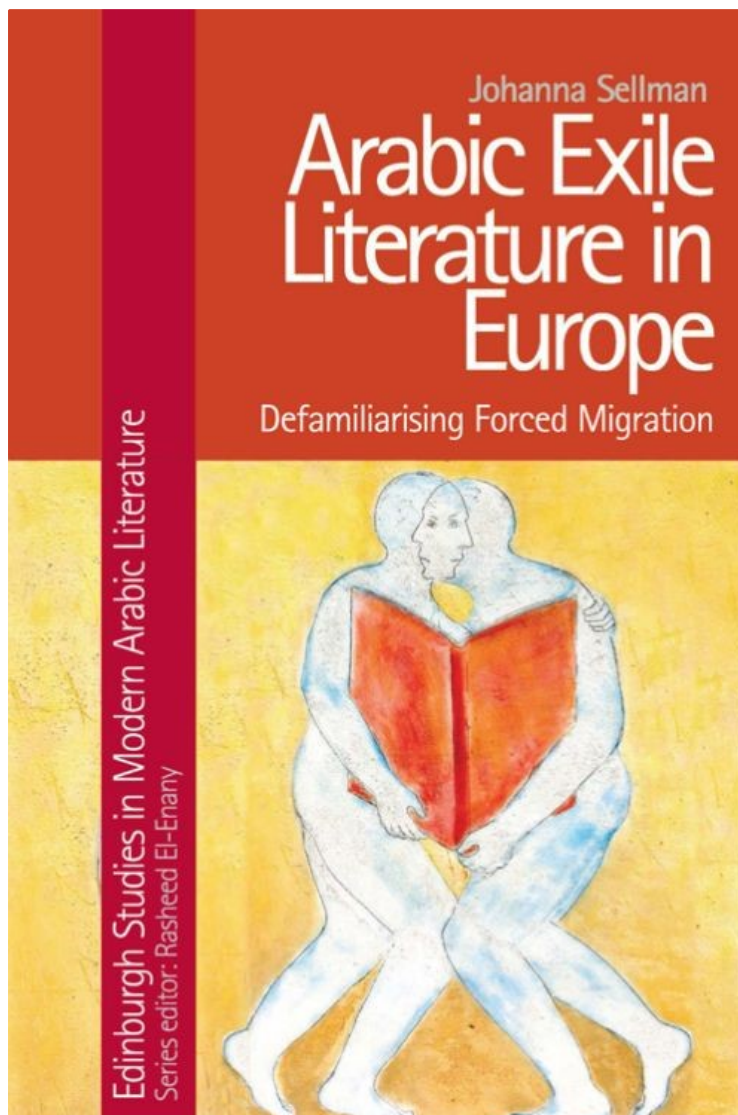


Figure 2 – Johanna Sellman, *Arabic Exile Literature in Europe*.

Defamiliarising Forced Migration, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022

In her recent book, *Arabic Exile Literature in Europe: Defamiliarising Forced Migration* (2022), Sellman highlights that since the end of the twentieth century, Arabic exile literature has increasingly become a literature written from the perspective of undocumented migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, who gradually replaced the intellectual, student and worker characters of the earlier migration novels.[2]. The status of these new literary subjects, who are mostly located outside normatively defined citizenship in their host countries, have changed the aesthetic and political dimensions of fiction: Arab authors turned away from canonical frameworks such as the East-West encounter, political commitment, and modernist understandings of exile, and turned to a new form of writing displacement. This literature explores the dynamics of forced migration and border spaces in both Europe and within several countries in the Middle East by

mediating different temporalities, spaces, and sociopolitical realities.

While a large part of these novels undoubtedly let the documentary or autobiographical narrative prevail, transcending the genre of the *testimonio*, another part of them intersects with different macro-trends of contemporary Arabic fiction, such as fantasy, magical realism, science fiction, utopias, dystopias and uchronias (alternate history), or other speculative genres. Speculative fiction is a category of fiction that encompasses all those literary genres that depart from reality, such as in the context of supernatural, futuristic, and other imaginative realms. Although these genres do not represent a real novelty in the history of Arabic literature, as they are tied to a much longer tradition,[3]

they display a new perception of time linked to the displacement experience: they create literary spaces to cope with traumatic memories, explore the unknown, imagine alternate worlds, and help thinking “outside of contemporary political impasse”, as recalled by Sellman,[4] through the implementation of defamiliarizing modes of writing and estrangement techniques. In my eyes, both the speculative and documentary trends, which contradict and mirror each other, have come to shape a new aesthetic of “refugeedom”[5] within the transnational Arabic literary field, crossing it from East to West. This aesthetic is based on the belief that the need for security, freedom and shelter expressed by the protagonists of these literary works does not necessarily correspond to the legal status assigned to them by international protection laws, which distinguish between undocumented immigrants, economic migrants, and refugees. The same goes for social prejudices, which tend to demonize migrants and pity the asylum seekers, treating them with condescension. This discrepancy between reality, material needs and self-representations results in the need for various displaced authors to give life to new universes and imagine new possible scenarios for existence in their countries of refuge.

Hence, utopia and dystopia are summoned, in order to account for the ambivalent nature of the asylum experience in Europe, which can quickly turn from dream to nightmare.

Utopia & Dystopia: The Two Faces of Today’s Hospitality

Some short stories translated and included in the English collections *Iraq +100* (2017) and *Palestine +100* (2019) are especially illustrative of this recent overlap between future writing and “migration” writing, where utopia and dystopia, and sometimes even uchronia, seem to constitute the authors’ preferred literary devices. The collection *Iraq +100*, in particular, is edited by the multi-award-winning Hassan Blasim, an Iraqi author who arrived as an asylum seeker in Finland in 2004. He became famous for his peculiar literary style, which he defined as a form of “nightmarish realism”, embedded in dystopian imaginaries. The editor of these books, Comma Press, have also just published two other similar anthologies from the Middle East: *Kurdistan +100* (2023) and *Egypt +100* (2023). Both are from the same futuristic vein, grounded in anticipation literature and attempts to build alternate versions of history, in which independence struggles and revolutions finally succeed.



Figure 3 – Comma Press Middle East Futurist Collection

Nonetheless, many more examples of this style can be found among the novels: for a start, *The Clouds' Player* (2016) by the Iraqi Ali Bader combines the experience of his arrival in Belgium as a refugee with that of the search for the Virtuous City imagined by the Medieval philosopher Al-Farabi, encroaching on the genre of utopia. In this pseudo-fictional work, Europe is indeed conceived as an “ideal place” of beauty and art, unlike sectarian violence-torn Iraq, where musicians spend their lifetime playing in the clouds. However, the cellist Nabīl, Bader’s alter-ego, will encounter the untenability of this idea after arriving in Europe and discovering the aporias of hospitality. Thus, he must confront the prejudices of the host society, which does not perceive him as an artist, as well as its monolithic idea of the Western world, and learn that one cannot be accepted by others unless one first accepts their diversity. In this way, Bader scrutinises the very idea of Europe, suggesting new possible scenarios of coexistence and solidarity in our transnational societies, based on the laws of musical harmony, in which dissonance itself creates absolute perfection.

In contrast, exiled Lebanese writer Hoda Barakat’s 2019 International Prize for Arabic Fiction-winning novel *The Night Post* (2018) directly paints a dystopian reality of asylum in Europe.[6]. The six protagonists of this epistolary novel come from different corners of the Arab world and belong to different categories and generations of migrants. All of them live like ghosts, stuck in limbo between past and present, against the backdrop of a *noir* Paris. They are unable to think about the future and are at the mercy of their loneliness. Their presence only become visible in the eyes of the host society when they are forced to commit some heinous crime. Through these kinds of violent interactions between migrants and hosts, the shelters provided by the West ultimately prove to be spaces of bestiality that dehumanize both the displaced and the people trying to help them, thus leaving no hope for the future of humankind.[7].

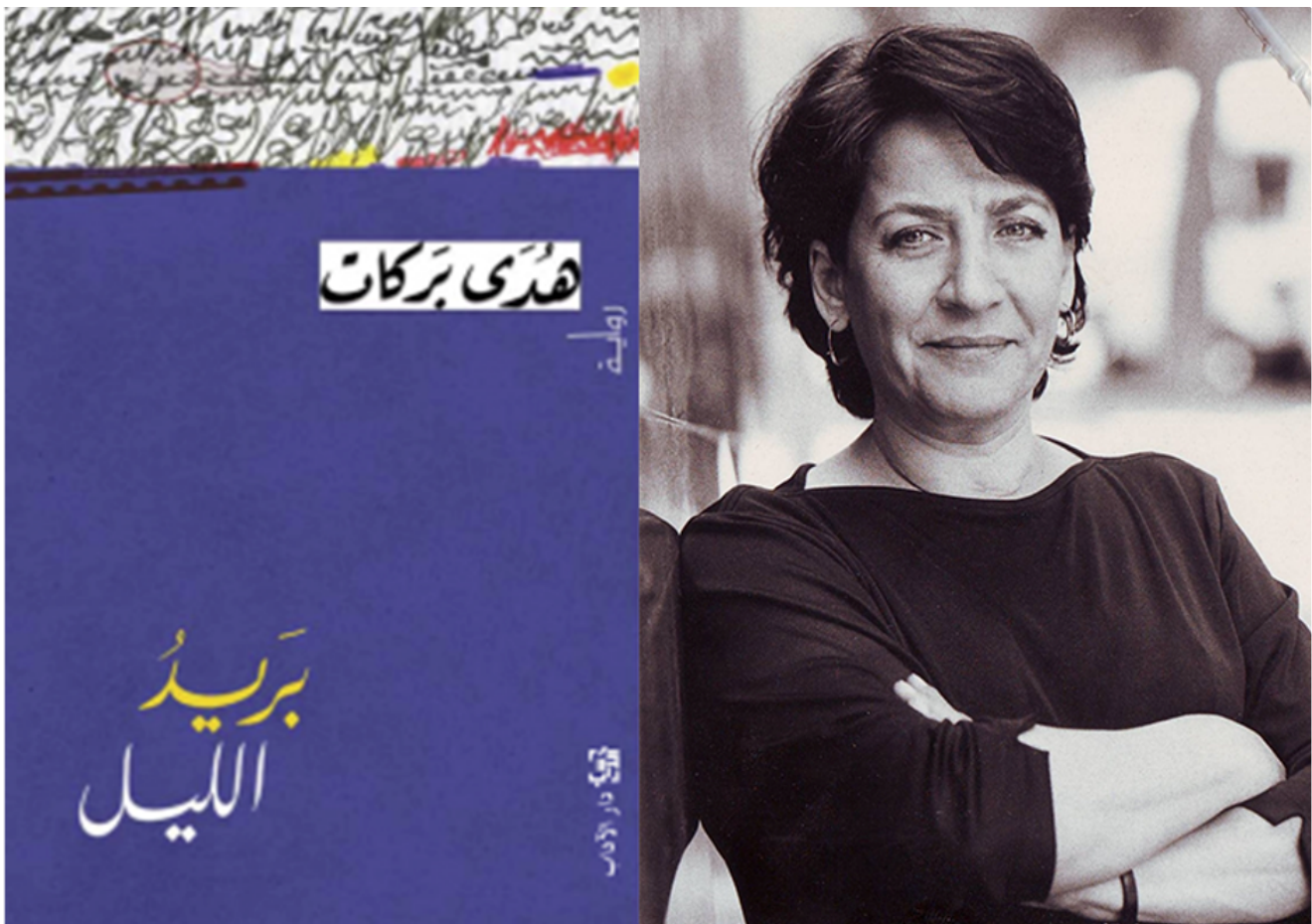


Figure 4 – Hoda Barakat and the cover of her novel *Barid al-Layl*

These novels present the two faces of today's hospitality, bringing into contrast not only two opposing places of arrival, such as the welcoming society of beauty and goodness embodied by Bader's utopia and the nightmarish universe symbolized by Barakat's dystopia, but also two distinct understandings of time: on the one hand, utopia presupposes that the present is corrupt; on the other hand, dystopia anticipates and prefigures the results of unsuccessful utopias. The latter in fact deviates from the linear trajectory of historical progress, becoming a distorted consequence of the former, where violence and horror are constantly repeated in a vicious cycle.[8] This "twin kind" of future writing, thus, offers the authors a pretext to manipulate reality and transpose social and political criticism into other times or spaces.



Figure 5 – Ali Bader and the cover of his novel 'Azif al-Ghuyum

The Syrian Case: Distant Future, the Weight of History and the Uncertainty of Homecoming

For Letizia Lombezi, the basis of the utopia–dystopia binomial is fully grasped when one chooses to analyze travel writing, particularly in modern and contemporary Arabic migration literature, as critique and self-critique often emerge from contact with otherness and awareness of diversity.[9]. In the case of the Syrian literary production, the depiction of these themes is further compounded by the uncertainty about returning home. This feeling transforms the story timeline into a constantly suspended time of waiting, where the imagined future often takes on post-apocalyptic guises. Over the last couple of years, apart from a few exceptions consisting of books that focus on homing practices implemented by refugees in their host cities, we are in fact witnessing the flourishing of novels with increasingly “dark” scenarios, due to the worsening of the Syrian crisis. Hence, destruction of local heritage and, by contrast, attempts at preservation of historical memory have become recurring topics.[10].

Two eloquent cases are *Aljamiado* (2022) by Ibrahim Al-Jabin, an opposition journalist who exiled himself first in Germany and then in Turkey, and the recently released *Wadi Qandil* (2023) by Nesrine Houry, an emerging poet and novelist who is currently residing in Madrid. *Aljamiado* constitutes the first dystopian novel by Al-Jabin, who, until now, had mostly devoted himself to recounting Syria’s past and the Baath’s problematic connivance with Nazi Germany, such as in *Eye of the East* (2017) and in *Diary of a Damascene Jew* (2018). He also wrote travelogues to Europe, for which he received the prestigious Ibn Battuta Prize in 2021. In his latest book, the same interest in history returns since the main story revolves around a group of researchers scattered across Europe,

the Gulf, North Africa, and Turkey who study the maps of the ancient city of Damascus searching for the ruins of a Roman amphitheater. The demise of Syrian civilization, in this undefined distant future, is compared to that of Al-Andalus: the title of the book refers indeed to the secret language of the Moriscos, *Aljamiado*, which was written in Spanish using the Arabic alphabet and was used after their Expulsion.

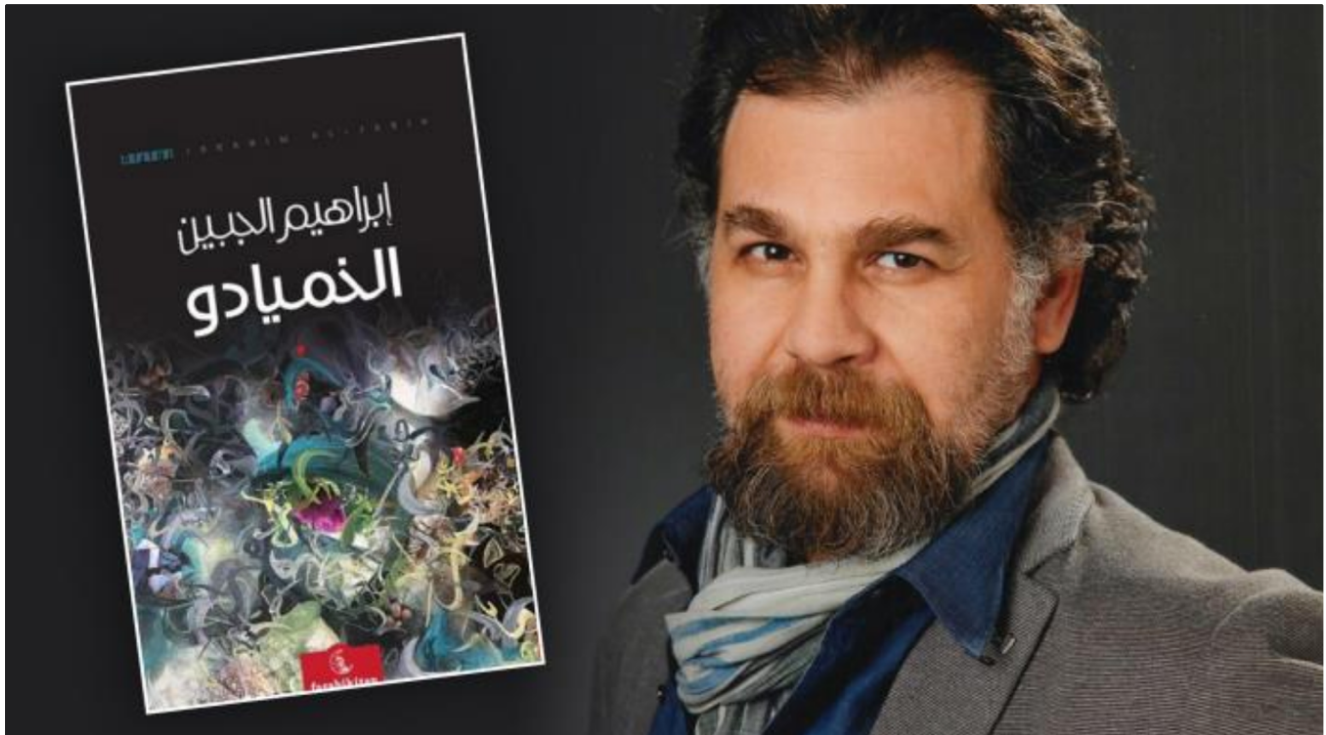


Figure6 – Ibrahim al-Janin and the cover of his novel, *Aljamiado*

source: <https://diffah.alaraby.co.uk>

As for Khoury's novel, we are instead faced with a story set in a nearer future. The events take place in the year 2029: the main character, Thoraya, returns to Syria in search of her childhood memories. She left as an asylum seeker when she was five years old, in 2014, sinking with a boat that dropped her on the Cypriot beach of Larnakes. Her journey starts from a remote marine area called Wadi Qandil, which was once a tourist destination. There, she finds the old copy of an autobiography of a writer named Ghaim Haddad in which he recounts chapters of his life and the lives of some friends, describing how some Syrian towns changed before and during the war. Through this book, Thoraya learns a lot about a past that she had ignored before, especially since the heroes of the manuscript belong to different religious and ethnic backgrounds and come from some regions that she hasn't really planned to visit during her journey. Therefore, Thoraya decides to search for the fate of Ghaim Haddad's characters in real life. The 20-year-old woman embarks on an even more complex journey in the footsteps of the book's protagonists, which will lead her to discover her lost Syrian roots.



Figure 7 – Nesrine Khoury and the cover of her book, *Wadi Qandil*

Conclusion: Shaping the Future, a Matter of Time and Possibilities?

As the plots of the reviewed novels suggest, the use of the future-setting becomes a pretext for talking about the past, where authors constantly oscillate between history and fiction. Kurdish-Syrian intellectual Haitham Hussein, who has been a refugee in London since 2014, has reflected a great deal on the meaning of “time” after exile and entrusted his thoughts to his latest memoir, *No One May Remain: Agatha Christie, Come, I’ll Tell You How I Live* (2018):

“The new places in which I’ve found myself have led me to dig deep into my past, into the memories of sorrow, oppression, and waste that I carry, that weigh me down. I convince myself that my future needs me to relieve it of the burden of those grudges, sorrows, and tragedies, so I can cross into tomorrow with the fewest possible losses.”

Hussein, 2018: 23

According to this perspective, time might become a tool in the service of writers to imagine alternate realities, where they can try to domesticate the pain of exile. Literature can also help unveiling the dehumanizing practices implemented on them by their countries of origin, as well as in their countries of arrival, where they are subjected to new forms of control and oppression. These authors’ strategies aim at suspending the laws that regulate border-politics and mobility, as well as to capture the empathy of their readers through a skillful balance between familiarization and defamiliarization techniques. Writers generate in them a “feeling of possibility”, committed to the transformation of reality. This “induced” need for change finds its greatest manifestation in the field of art, which is the best promoter of heterotopias and alternative imaginaries: it entrusts the literary aesthetics displayed in migration writing with the task of trying to shape the future of hospitality, in order to create more just, equitable and supportive

societies, which might be freed from mobility discrimination and where individuals fleeing their land could actually find a new place to call home. From scratch.

About the author

Annamaria Bianco holds a double PhD from Aix-Marseille University (IREMAM), and University of Naples "L'Orientale" (DAAM). She is the author of thesis « *Adab al-malġa'* » : *représenter le refuge dans le roman arabe du XXIe siècle* (2022). She is currently associate researcher at IREMAM and teaching assistant in Arabic language and literature at University of Toulouse 2 – Jean Jaurès. Her research interests focus on creativity and diaspora, the circulation and translation of Arabic literature, Arab exiled and refugees' literary productions, as well as the representation of the humanitarian field and human rights discourse in fiction. She is one of the editors of the junior scholars' journal *Maydan – rivista sui mondi arabi, semitici e islamici*.

References

[1] Please note that "migration," "displacement," and "exile" are by no means synonymous in current language: "migration" is used as an umbrella term to refer to any person who moves away from their usual place of residence, while "exile" has traditionally involved coercive expulsion from one's home country, usually for political reasons, but these statutes find no place in today's jurisprudence, which distinguish economic and clandestine migrants from stateless people, asylum seekers, refugees and internally displaced persons. The use of quotation marks in the expression of Arab "migration" literature is therefore intended to refer to both the variety and the complexity of these different experiences by grouping them under a convenient, condensed label.

[2] Johanna Sellman, *Arabic Exile Literature in Europe. Defamiliarising Forced Migration*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022.

[3] As stressed by the scholar Ada Barbaro in several of her studies on these kind of literary genres, the emergence of science-fiction in Arabic (*al-khayyal al-'ilmi*) can be traced back to the second part of the twentieth century. However, it has elaborated themes and images that switch among the fantastic, the marvelous, the utopian, and whose seeds belong to classical heritage and to the sense of wonder sought by the *mirabilia* literature.

[4] Sellman, 5.

[5] This English word seems to be the translation of a term first coined by the Russian-Jewish scholar Avram Kirzhnits during the First World War: *bezhenstvo*. The term is widely employed in the field of *Refugee Studies*, where it is considered to be worth reviving,

because it does not only direct attention to the experience of refuge itself, but also encompasses the process of social labelling and legal categorization, stressing an existential and psychical human condition with universal implications. For further details, see: *Refugee Imaginaries: Research Across the Humanities*, Emma Cox et al. (eds.), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2020.

[6] The books has been translated into English by Marylin Booth with the title *Voices of the lost* (2021).

[7] For a more detailed study of the novel, see the article: Annamaria Bianco, "Au crépuscule de l'humanité. Incommunicabilité, hospitalité et violence dans *Courrier de nuit* de Hoda Barakat", *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 58, 2022, 231-260, DOI: [10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2022/01/009](https://doi.org/10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2022/01/009).

[8] Tuyler Miller, "Eternity No More: Walter Benjamin on the Eternal Return", in: Tuyler Miller (ed.), *Given World and Time: Temporalities in Context*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2008, 279-295.

[9] Letizia Lombezzi, "Alterità, utopia e distopia in letteratura araba. Alcuni esempi di autori egiziani, dal primo Novecento alla disillusione post-primavera araba", *Griseldaonline*, 19/2, 2020, 44-45.

[10] On this last point you might read: Anne-Marie McManus, "On the Ruins of What's to Come, I Stand: Time and Devastation in Syrian Cultural Production since 2011", *Critical Inquiry*, 48/1, 2021, 45-67.

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Citation

Annamaria Bianco, Moving Through Space, Sheltering Across Time: Alternate Realities in Contemporary Arabic Fiction of (Forced) Displacement, in: TRAF0 – Blog for Transregional Research, 27.04.2023, <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/46821>



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