

Revisiting the Question of the Novel/Nation



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The Palestinian Novel: From 1948 to the Present, by Bashir Abu-Manneh. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 244 pages. \$99.99 cloth, \$80.00 e-book.

THE ARABIC NOVEL has long been tangled up with questions of nationalism. To appreciate just to what extent, we might contrast it with the example of Arabic poetry in the formal register. Critics do not read poets primarily in the context of the state of their citizenship, or with specific reference to a particular national literary context. The work of Adunis, Ahmad ‘Abd al-Mu‘ti Hijazi, and Mohammed Bennis, to take three examples from the modernist canon, are not chiefly thought of as Syrian, Egyptian, or Moroccan but rather as Arab.

The example of poets such as Mahmoud Darwish and Badr Shakir al-Sayyab might seem to contradict this, since much of their poetry emanates out of vividly drawn local landscapes. The centrality of named homes in some of their poems—Birweh and Jaikur—illustrates how much their poetry was shaped by their particular experiences as a Palestinian and an Iraqi, respectively. Even so, for critics the achievement of great Arab poets like Darwish and al-Sayyab has to do with their ability to *transcend* the limitations of territorial nationalism, to be Arab poetry, or simply “poetry.”

Other apparent exceptions to the rule outlined above show just how pervasive it is. The works of colloquial poets such as Ahmad Fu‘ad Najm or Tawfiq Ziyad, for instance, are appreciated on the grounds of their specificity of reference and the localism of their idiom. In colloquial poetry, these are not flaws but rather signs of authenticity and rootedness. That even now Arabic colloquial poetry still does not enjoy high status and that it is often altogether excluded from critical discussion only underscore the fact that poetry in the formal register possesses unique and real independence from nationalist projects.

In contrast, the Arabic novel has almost always been seen through the lens of nationalist paradigms. During the post-independence era when the academic study of the Arabic novel began in earnest, Egyptian critics like ‘Abd al-Azim Anis and Mahmud Amin al-‘Alim built on ‘Abd al-Muhsin Taha Badr’s foundational work, which drew on materialist accounts of the European novel—especially Ian Watt’s study of the eighteenth-century English novel—to link the rise of the novel form with the rise of a national middle class.¹ The story they told was one of origins and “firsts,” based on sharply drawn aesthetic boundaries (dividing “serious novels” from “entertainment novels”) and neat through lines of development and growth. Assumed in this

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critical narrative was an effortless fit between a set of overlapping processes of national consolidation: the “maturation” of a national bourgeoisie; the evolution of a national print market and culture; the realization of an independent nation-state; all of which would ripen into a bounty of literary fruit: a canon of aesthetically “mature” novels.

The *novel/nation* model prefigures and resonates strongly with Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” thesis even if Anderson never uttered a word about Arabic novels.² Sixty years later, it still influences the study of the Arabic novel in Egypt (and beyond). Academics and critics speak about Arabic novels largely according to national origins and in conversation with their respective national canons. “The Syrian novel” is studied as a defined canon, as is “the Iraqi novel,” “the Saudi novel,” and so on. Always in the singular and definite, as if each belonged to a separate literary tradition, each with its own firsts and schools, each in the shape of the nation.

It was postcolonial theory that first promised an escape from, or correction to the *novel/nation* account. Subsequent (mostly comparatist) approaches—queer theory, world literature, translation studies—have led scholarship in other directions altogether. But while scholarship may have turned to face other dimensions of Arabic novels, the literary monuments of the modern Arab literary world have never gone away, and they have yet to lose their nationalist shape and sheen. These novels still loom large on library shelves and reading lists, posing nationalist questions that, no matter how worn and tired, remain urgent and unanswered.

Bashir Abu-Manneh’s new book, *The Palestinian Novel: From 1948 to the Present*, returns to these important questions in ways that are original and often convincing. Commenting on the infamous exchange between Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad over “national allegory,” Abu-Manneh writes: “The ground that Jameson outlines has been hard to sustain in the literary postcolonial field. . . . The nation has either been evaded or inflated as a sphere of analysis. A dominant poststructuralist strand has tended to deconstruct the nation going either locally under it or globally over it—but never right *through* it as a politics of liberation and decolonization.”³ This, then, is one of the chief goals of Abu-Manneh’s study—to reconnect the emancipatory, anti-colonial dimensions of nationalism with the aesthetics of the Palestinian novel as it developed in the 1960s and ’70s. To accomplish this, Abu-Manneh relies on two core theoretical insights—one having to do with the particularities of Palestinian history, the other with foundational debates about the aesthetics of the novel as a literary form.

First, the particularities of Palestinian history. Abu-Manneh begins with the observation that Palestinian novels cannot fit the *novel/nation* paradigm for the simple reason that Palestinian history was never allowed to follow the path of national consolidation: “No other Arab people faced both imperialism and settler colonialism (as two distinct yet converging forces), struggled against both, and was ultimately defeated and forced out of its homeland into permanent exile and dispersion as a result.”⁴ Instead of state formation, Abu-Manneh stresses, “Statelessness, permanent exile, and occupation mark out the Palestinians from their Arab counterparts.”⁵ By problematizing the relation between the Palestinian novel and history, Abu-Manneh is able to undertake what he proposes—working *through* nationalism as a politics of liberation and decolonization. This leads him away from smooth narratives of nation and canon formation and toward more jagged histories of uprising and defeat, mobilization and retreat, resistance and accommodation, leap and break.

Drawing on the work of Rashid Khalidi, Ghassan Kanafani, Hisham Sharabi, and Faisal Darraj, Abu-Manneh goes on to periodize moments in Palestinian history—pre-1967, 1967–70, 1970–82, and so forth—so as to distinguish two divergent (even conflicting) projects within the Palestinian national liberation movement. On the one hand, Palestinian *revolution*, predicated on the understanding that Palestinian liberation could only take place with the overthrow of existing Arab regimes. On the other, Palestinian *statism*—the bid for Palestinian statehood—which meant accommodating Palestinian aspirations to the regional status quo, in order “to become another (para-)nation-state seeking its own interests with[in] the confines of post-colonial Arab divisions.”⁶ The differences between these two projects, Abu-Manneh insists, have as many consequences for culture (and literature) as they do for politics: “To read the Palestinian novel or Palestinian politics through the prism of statehood is in fact to repress the history of revolution, modernization and cultural renaissance. In Palestinian politics, the statist option represents an outcome of the defeat of the revolutionary forces. The political and cultural rise of the Palestinians after the *nakba* was always about much more than statehood, and the shift from liberation to independence reflects a shrinking of political horizons and possibilities.”⁷

To develop the consequences of this for Palestinian literature, Abu-Manneh turns toward the theoretical legacy of Georg Lukàcs. This allows him to grapple with formal issues of the novel. The turn is quite productive at times, shifting the argument toward an exploration of fragmentation and contradiction. In this way, Abu-Manneh’s argument does more than simply treat the subject of Palestinian novels in relation to Palestinian history. It also makes the persuasive case for why Lukàcs and his interlocutors (such as Theodor Adorno or Jameson) need to be engaged with more seriously when it comes to reading modern Arabic novels. Indeed, as Abu-Manneh points out, the relevance of Lukàcs was already understood by an earlier generation of radical Arab intellectuals (including Darraj, Kanafani, and George Tarabishi).

For Lukàcs, the chief goal of emancipatory art is to undo the processes of capitalism that transform living, breathing social relations into inert things. Reification is thus a core component in Lukàcs’s account of capitalism, since it leads to a particular form of alienation where human subjects mistake themselves for objects and vice versa. Like all liberatory theories, Lukàcs’s is deeply normative: those novels that offer a glimpse of *totality*—that is, the sum total of social relations—deserve commendation; those that reify social relations and alienate subjects from their agency, deserve critique.

Abu-Manneh spends time with the notion of *typicality*, which for Lukàcs serves to articulate the relation between protagonists and the circumstances of their world and with the ability of individual characters to stand in, as types, for more general experiences. As Abu-Manneh succinctly puts it: “Types thus stand at the intersection of major historical changes and ruptures, and are focal points for both large-scale and more private and domestic processes.”⁸ In Lukàcs, the nature of the relation between character and action is paramount. In realist fiction—the privileged genre of novel for both Lukàcs and Abu-Manneh—the relation between protagonist and action is dynamic and dialectical: just as the circumstances of the world act on the growth of character, so too does character exert a degree of transformative agency on their circumstances. Lukàcs famously advocated the work of reactionary Balzac over the left-leaning Zola on precisely these grounds: whereas Balzac’s protagonists have an ability to remake their world, Zola’s appear as spectators

rather than agents. It is on this basis that Lukàcs championed a single aesthetics—realism—over others, especially naturalism and modernism: the former sustains a vision of human agency in the face of reification; the latter two do not. Abu-Manneh shares this position to some extent, although it is not always easy to say exactly how.

For Abu-Manneh, arguably the most important component of Lukàcs's theory of the novel is its historicity. The novel is neither a static nor neutral form, but rather one that exists in relation to social history, which means that its styles and genres—its very shape—arise from particular circumstances, and change with them accordingly. For Lukàcs, the contradictions of key events—such as the defeated revolutions of 1848—dramatically changed how nineteenth-century novelists would envision character, agency, and action. In Abu-Manneh's account of Palestinian novels, two dates—1948 and 1967—perform a similar role. For Abu-Manneh, these events meant that the horizons of possibility shifted for Palestinian writers, as did their sense of Palestinian agency.

At this point, the prongs of Abu-Manneh's argument come together to explore why a certain revolutionary/emancipatory type of aesthetic (realism) in the Palestinian novel would emerge from the revolutionary/emancipatory context of 1960s Palestinian history, and why, following defeats, realism would be eclipsed by another aesthetic, that of modernism.

The chapters of Abu-Manneh's book explore these historical arguments across the careers of four well-known authors—but it does not go smoothly in each case. In chapter 1, Abu-Manneh cannot argue that the poet, critic, artist, essayist, and novelist Jabra Ibrahim Jabra wrote primarily in a realist vein. On the contrary, he concedes: "Making a case for Jabra as a realist is not without its challenges."⁹ In a discussion of *Screams in a Long Night* (1955) and of *Hunters in a Narrow Street* (1960), both written in English, then *al-Safina* (1970) and *al-Bahth 'an Walid Mas'ud* (1978), Abu-Manneh attempts to make the case that Jabra did not openly embrace modernism until after 1967. Though Abu-Manneh's readings in the texts are illuminating and nuanced, this broader claim is not convincing, for reasons to which I will return. In chapter 2, Abu-Manneh turns to the work of Kanafani to argue that "Kanafani carved out his own distinct literary aesthetic . . . realist and emancipatory, plebian, and participatory."¹⁰ Importantly, Abu-Manneh argues, the emancipatory politics of Kanafani's novels—*Rijal fi-l-shams* (1962) and *'A'id ila Haifa* (1970)—were rooted in a universal vision. In chapter 3, arguably the strongest chapter in the book, Abu-Manneh traces the aesthetic developments of Emile Habiby's career, and uses Lukàcs's notion of typicality—in discussing the *Six-Day Sextet* (1968) or *The Pessoptimist* (1974) for instance—to illustrate how effectively Habiby's novel explore the contradictions of Palestinian life under Israeli rule. In chapter 4, Abu-Manneh argues that Sahar Khalifeh's novels—*Lam na'ud jawari lakum* (1974), *al-Sabbar* (1976), and *'Abbad al-shams* (1980)—present a "panoramic realism" that explores "the inwardness, atomization, and decomposition of anti-colonial politics" in the wake of the "failure of the first intifada and Oslo."¹¹ In chapter 5, Abu-Manneh turns to a series of modernist novels by Jabra, Habiby, Khalifeh, and others. It is at this point that Abu-Manneh departs from Lukàcs's negative appraisal of modernism to embrace Adorno's valorization of it, thereby drawing "a direct relationship between modernist emergence and the realm of praxis and politics."¹² He writes, "I argue that the Arab mid 1970s [*sic*] onwards are, indeed, historically a time of emancipatory recoil and defeat. . . . My aim is to show that Palestinian modernism is in fact an aesthetic of defeat that both registers and resists the disintegration of praxis. The end of

revolutionary potential in the Arab world, strongest in the period between 1967 and 1973, is thus consequential to the diasporic novel form, ushering in the collapse of realism and the liquidation of the individual. The (Lukàcsian) intertwining of the individual and the social, the private and the private [*sic*] is lost—only to be replaced by disconnection and atomization. Rather than acting in a fundamentally knowable world, the modernist self is marked by angst and profound disorientation. If Lukàcs reads this change as total collapse into unreason, Adorno reads it as a form of resistance and redemption.”¹³

The introduction of Adorno into the analysis undermines the use of Lukàcs’s categories and muddles the broader historical arguments, tying revolution to realism, and defeat to modernism. It is here that Abu-Manneh’s method begins to show signs of strain. Take, for instance, Abu-Manneh’s (following Lukàcs) realist and modernist categories that are presented as if they were natural, as if they were not his own assertions; “Khalifeh never becomes a modernist,” he states as if it were a fact.¹⁴ What does such a claim mean, especially when it is ostensibly both a negative judgment (for Lukàcs) and a positive one (for Adorno)? Lukàcs’s categories are unnecessarily rigid: ambiguity, overlap, borrowing, and cross-fertilization are dismissed as unthinkable. Similarly, for him aesthetic styles may unfold in paradoxical and contradictory ways, but they do so according to a known historical order: first realism, then modernism. The problem of relying too heavily on neat historical periodization and pure aesthetic categories is that at worst, they appear as reifications, and at best they are always vulnerable to tautological argumentation, making it very difficult to untangle starting assumptions from evidence and conclusions.

Besides the problems of definitions, periodizations, and categories, Abu-Manneh faces another more serious one, namely the move to separate the genres of literature—poetry and novel—from one another. Putting poetry back into the story of Palestinian literature shows just how hard it would be to apply Lukàcs’s periodizations. This is the issue in Abu-Manneh’s historicist argument that Jabra was not a “practising modernist” but a “literary and cultural modernizer” before 1967.¹⁵ Leaving aside the unexplained difference between a modernist and a modernizer, the statement does not do justice to Jabra’s actual stature—in the 1950s and 1960s—as the most important midcentury interpreter of Anglophone modernism in the Arab world. Jabra’s diwan, *Tammuz fi-l-madina* (1959), openly embraced T. S. Eliot’s vision of literary modernism, just as his translation of James Frazer was similarly meant to facilitate Arab reception of Eliot’s poetry.

Abu-Manneh alludes to these facts, but does not adequately explore the problems they cause for the kind of historicization he proposes. Similarly, he notes that Jabra was translating William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, but does not really acknowledge that this work set in motion a series of modernist engagements—before 1967—with Faulkner’s narrative style on the part of many Arab authors from the period, including himself, Kanafani, Naguib Mahfouz, and more. There are other wrinkles as well, as for instance the notable role Jabra played—along with Adunis, Tawfiq Sayegh, al-Sayyab—at the famous 1961 Rome conference that articulated a comprehensive vision of Arab literary modernity. There is good reason to think that this event—and Jabra’s embrace of Eliot (rather than Hikmet, Lorca, and Neruda)—were not so detached from other political alignments. During the early 1960s, Jabra would collaborate with the same CIA-front group (the Congress for Cultural Freedom) that organized the 1961 Rome conference to formulate a kind of Arab modernism that could go up against Soviet models of social realism.

Jabra's essays on art also indicate that his turn toward modernism predated 1967 by many years. All of this is to say that Jabra's career shows just how complicated this play between realism and modernism was during the period in question, when Palestinian intellectuals in exile were not just navigating between anti-colonial revolution and statism, but doing so within the minefield of Cold War politics, and later, Baathist authoritarianism.

A different, but equally salient point could be made with regard to Kanafani. Kanafani's short stories and plays of the 1960s are evidence of a writer unafraid of experimenting with various styles—realist, naturalist, modernist—to achieve his artistic goals. *Rijal fi-l-shams* and *Ma tabaqqalukum* (1966) both engage actively with the radically solipsistic modernist narrative style of Faulkner that Jabra had translated only a few years earlier. And while two of Kanafani's most realist (in a Lukácsian sense) works, *'A'id ila Haifa* and *Umm Sa'd* (1969) were published in the wake of 1967, Kanafani still spoke glowingly of his attachment to Faulkner's modernism during the last interview he gave, shortly before his assassination.¹⁶ In short, it is very hard to periodize Kanafani's oeuvre, let alone claim that he first was a realist and then, in the wake of 1967, became a modernist.

Despite these issues, Abu-Manneh's book is an original and ambitious contribution to the study of Palestinian literature. His is the first study to offer a truly formalist account—and critique—of Palestinian novels. And when so many scholars have retreated from criticism—from contentious claim-making in general—it is refreshing to see someone engaging in learned debate. Abu-Manneh reminds us that there are things at stake in the Palestinian novel, in its history, and in its reception. Many scholars will dispute some of his claims, but most will agree that this book breathes life into the field.

About the Author

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ENDNOTES

- 1 'Abd al-Muhsin Taha Badr, *Tatawwur al-riwaya al-'arabiyya fi-Misr* (Cairo: Dar al-ma'araf, 1977 [1963]); 'Abd al-Azim Anis and Mahmud Amin al-'Alim, *Fi-l-thaqafa al-misriyya* (Cairo: Dar al-thaqafa al-jadida, 1989); Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in DeFoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001 [1957]).
- 2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).
- 3 Bashir Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel: From 1948 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 13.
- 4 Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel*, p. 19.
- 5 Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel*, p. 2.
- 6 Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel*, p. 30.
- 7 Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel*, p. 31.
- 8 Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel*, p. 8.
- 9 Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel*, p. 33.
- 10 Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel*, p. 71.

- 11 Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel*, p. 117.
- 12 Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel*, p. 136.
- 13 Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel*, p. 137.
- 14 Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel*, p. 137.
- 15 Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel*, p. 33.
- 16 Kanafani: "As for Faulkner, I very much admire his novel, *The Sound and the Fury*. Many critics say that my novel *Ma tabaqqa lakum* is an extension of this admiration for *The Sound and the Fury*. I agree: I am very much influenced by Faulkner. However, *Ma tabaqqa lakum* is not a mechanical facsimile of Faulkner. It is an attempt to benefit from the aesthetic devices and artistic accomplishments Faulkner realized." "Ghassan Kanafani fi-akhir liqa' idha'i," *al-Hadaf* 5 (15 September 1973): p. 129.