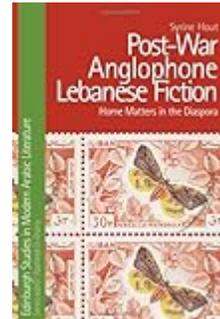




Syrine Hout. *Postwar Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in the Diaspora.* Edinburgh Studies in Modern Arabic Literature Series. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012. 259 pp. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-4342-4.



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At Home in Diaspora: Mapping Affiliation in Syrine Hout's Postwar Anglophone Lebanese Fiction

The first in a series of recent publications on Lebanese literature written after the civil war, Syrine Hout's monograph constitutes an extended scholarly meditation on divergent conceptions of home in the English-language writing of several diasporic Lebanese authors within this postwar time frame: Rabih Alameddine, Nathalie Abi-Ezzi, Rawi Hage, Tony Hanania, Nada Awar Jarrar, and Patricia Sarrafian Ward. Hout argues that contemporary Anglophone texts by Lebanese authors merit individualized academic focus as globalization, Western education, and relocation have all resulted in English becoming not only a one of Lebanon's diasporic languages but also a language that has come to participate in how Lebanese culture develops the capacity to structure and redefine itself (p. 5). As with French, English has become a central language for Lebanese authors to negotiate ideas of the nation and national affiliation, regardless of whether their works are written inside or outside of Lebanon. With great attention to plurality of literary technique, style, and form, *Postwar Anglophone Lebanese*

Fiction: Home Matters in the Diaspora comparatively analyzes the ways in which an idea of home is elaborated in select texts from each of these authors' oeuvres, and how this idea stands in relation to values and attitudes associated with literary representations of wartime Lebanon and the various nations to which characters in the works relocate. Crucial to this conversation are the grounding distinctions Hout draws in her introduction between diaspora and exile and nostophobia and nostalgia (pp. 8, 14). As Hout explains, referring to the work of literary critic Nico Israel, although both exilic and diasporic writings engage themes of displacement, exile presupposes a coherent subject and well-defined realities of here and now, whereas diaspora accounts for hybridity and performativity which complicate notions of nation, location and identity (p. 8). Whether their registers are more exilic, diasporic, nostalgic (desiring to return), or nostophobic (fearful of return) (p. 14), the texts under consideration all engage in some fashion the question of how possibilities of affil-

iation and attachment are complicated by the Lebanese civil war and characters' resultant displacement.

Part 1, "Homesickness and Sickness of Home," is composed of two chapters, the first of which, "Koolaid's and *Unreal City*," seeks to provide a comparative analysis of the exilic and diasporic sensibilities at work in *Koolaid's* (1998) by Alameddine and *Unreal City* (1999) by Hanania (p. 24). Hout shows how these authors use postmodern techniques of formal experimentation to emphasize the enormity of the civil war's traumatic impingements through literary representation. Furthermore, through close readings of the texts, she discusses how characters' sexual identities and experiences with gendered social and familial dynamics influence individual conceptions of national belonging, whether to a fictional Lebanon or the country of relocation. Ultimately, Hout concludes that "neither novel portrays exile (or the diaspora) and the nation as antithetical entities but as realities coexisting within the individual, the nation and the host country" (p. 51).

The second chapter, "The Perv and Somewhere, Home," compares Alameddine's short story collection *The Perv* (1999) to Jarrar's *Somewhere, Home* (2004), a tripartite composite of the accounts of three separate female characters. Hout's emphasis in this chapter is on both texts' discrepant literary representations of "homesickness" as either "sickness of home," that is, "critical memory" of Lebanon during the civil war, or "nostalgic memory" of a "timeless and splendid Lebanon." While Hout argues that Jarrar ultimately presents a notion of home as a physical location rife with interconnection among blood or adapted kin, for Alameddine it is more abstract, a "peace of mind which can be enjoyed anywhere" (p. 55). As with the preceding chapter, Hout shows how channels and potentialities of affiliation in the texts are complicated by traditional familial and social relations and expectations, gender norms, and sexual orientation, as well as sectarian and class affiliation that followed the civil war's onset. She also pays significant attention to the role of writing in both texts as a process that helps characters work through difficult memories and create alternative sites of belonging.

Part 2, "Trauma Narratives: The Scars of War," compares Alameddine's *I, The Divine* (2001) to Ward's *The Bullet Collection* (2003). Hout's focus here is on both authors' textual representations of trauma, particularly posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the therapeutic function writing affords the characters of these novels.

As with the preceding chapters, diegetic elaborations of home and homeland are identified but with special attention paid to the ways in which traumatic events and their aftermath interface with these modes of belonging. Due to their sensitive and variegated fictional depictions of trauma sustained during the civil war, Hout posits, both works are "located at the intersection of trauma fiction in general and the post-war Anglophone Lebanese novel in particular" (p. 76).

Part 3, "Playing with Fire at Home and Abroad," includes chapter 4 and 5 of Hout's study. Chapter 4 compares the depictions of wartime youth militarization in Alameddine's *The Hakawati* (2008) and Abi-Ezzi's *A Girl Made of Dust* (2008) and resultant effects on characters' "attitudes towards Lebanon-as-homeland" (p. 109). Chapter 5 is focused solely on Hage's *De Niro's Game* (2006). Also concerning itself with literary representations of the militarization of young men, this chapter is notable for its careful illustration of how the novel's literary polyphony and internationalist bent reveal the interdependent relation between wartime sectarian rivalries in Lebanon and shifting international alliances and agendas. Hout writes that "De Niro's Game delivers the most trenchant and comprehensive critique of civil warfare and its psycho-social ramifications from a ground-level perspective" (p. 134).

The sixth chapter, comparing Hage's *Cockroach* (2008) to Jarrar's *A Good Land* (2009), and an afterword constitute part 4 of Hout's monograph, "Exile versus Repatriation." Hout contrasts the varied responses to exile and expatriation depicted in both novels. While she contends that *Cockroach* shows exile being psychically overcome, however fleetingly, through an idiosyncratic and internal redefinition of value in a new country, she notes that *A Good Land* culminates in physical relocation to Lebanon following the war.

Though Hout's interrogation of the politics of Lebanese sectarianism are especially astute in chapter 5, *Postwar Anglophone Lebanese Fiction* would have benefited from a more in-depth discussion of sectarianism as an externally influenced discourse with a particular and contingent history mobilized during critical moments of Lebanon's modernity, including the civil war, rather than as a purely internal phenomenon exclusive to the twentieth century. As Usama Makdisi writes in *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (2000), the converging, strategic influence of an Ottoman Empire in decline as well as European (British and French) and US

travelers, poets, and missionaries increasingly fascinated with Mount Lebanon all pointedly colored the evolution of Lebanese sectarian attitudes and narratives well before the French mandate era, which in turn resulted in even more direct political intervention. Contending with these early histories is not about diminishing personal agency in political and sectarian strife but, to the contrary, about productively nuancing our comprehension of the dialogic relationships between external influence and internal political affairs, as well as between the individual and the national society and government.

Relatedly, while gender forms an important dimension of Hout's analysis of how characters experience and imagine a sense of home, whether inside or outside a fictionalized Lebanon, patriarchal Lebanese society is simply taken for granted within the work (p. 59), creating the impression that contemporary Lebanese gender norms, as with sectarianism, are a wholly internal and current phenomenon. By contrast, in *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920* (2001), Akram Fouad Khater shows that hegemonic, modern Lebanese notions of gender relations and family are directly tied to the mass Western migration of Lebanese peasantry in the late nineteenth

century, their subsequent return immigration and incorporation into a gradually ascendant, modern Lebanese middle class. Far from extraneous background, these discussions seem directly pertinent to a literary study about how fictional valuations of home and homeland are influenced by migration from Lebanon within select texts.

These concerns aside, in *Postwar Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*, Hout delivers a pioneering work of scholarship of what she presciently foresees becoming a fuller-fledged variant of diasporic Lebanese literature (p. 11). During a period where transnational Arab literature is still more commonly grouped under the country of relocation (for example, Arab American/Arab Canadian), Hout importantly offers new possibilities for analytical distinction. Her qualification of how these authors' works resist official, amnesiac Lebanese policy regarding remembering and commemoration of the civil war also reveals an important political purpose for the literature under analysis, even if this is a politics that resists reduction to a particular governmental or ideological camp. An interdisciplinary study that offers a fresh analysis of the works of several individually celebrated authors, *Postwar Anglophone Lebanese Fiction* reveals new pathways of interpretation, and for scholarship more broadly.

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