THE PALESTINIAN NOVEL: FROM 1948 TO THE PRESENT BY BASHIR ABU-MANNEH

The Palestinian Novel: From 1948 to the Present, Bashir Abu-Manneh. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. £64.99. ISBN: 9781107136526.

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Bashir Abu-Manneh's *The Palestinian Novel* is a fascinating study that follows the trajectory of the Palestinian novel from the *nakba* (the Arabic term meaning "Catastrophe" that refers to the 1948 expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland) all the way through to the Oslo Accords, a set of agreements in the 1990s between the government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The book looks at novels by important Palestinian authors based in various sites across the Middle East: Baghdad, Beirut, Nablus, Haifa. These novels – Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's *The Ship* (1970) and *In Search of Walid Masoud* (1978), Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* (1963), and Emily Habiby's *The Secret Life of Saeed, the Ill-fated Pessoptimist* (1974) – are considered keystones to the concept of the Palestinian novel. There are also forays into other works – Jean Genet's *Prisoner of Love* (1986) and Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* (1998) – and the final chapter (the highlight of this study) centres on the jointly written text, Jabra and Abdelrahman Munif's *World without Maps* (1982).

The value of Abu-Manneh's study is manifold. Firstly, it is the first text to present Palestinian novels (some of which have not been translated into English) to the Anglophone world. Moreover, it does so in a way that distances itself from the traditional postcolonial mode of literary analysis that fixates on the nation. Abu-Manneh notes that to read the Palestinian novel through "the prism of statehood is in fact to repress the history of revolution, modernisation, and cultural renaissance" (31), to ultimately flatten its dialectical complexity. But the true brilliance of Abu-Manneh's study lies in his ability to read the Palestinian novel in a way that amalgamates history and an interest in aesthetic form. Postcolonial studies is all too often accused of being exclusively concerned with politics, seeing literature, in the words of Fredric Jameson, simply as "national allegory", at the expense of a serious engagement with aesthetics and stylistics. In this study history and form are placed on an equal footing.

Abu-Manneh notes a shift in the tone and style of the Palestinian novel after the Six-Day War of 1967, which was considered a major defeat for Palestinians. He argues that in the days preceding 1967, realism was the dominant aesthetic because there was still a sense of revolutionary potential – the possibility of some sort of political or social change or resolution for the Palestinian people. However, 1967 ushers in feelings of anxiety, disillusionment, and uncertainty (to compound the earlier feelings of dispossession) in the Palestinian novel. These feelings are expressed and registered through a modernist aesthetic that "brackets off the referent or real historical world, thickens its textures and deranges its forms to forestall instant consumability"(27). (However, Abu-Manneh is quick to conclude that we should not assume that realism suddenly disappeared after 1967 – that is clearly not the case.) Underpinning these observations about the movement from realism to modernism are the theories of Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno. Lukács notes that in spaces marked by a revolutionary spirit – in times leading towards huge historical, sociological, or political changes – realism is dominant. The novel functions as a repository of praxis, of social and political change. In fact, Lukács is deeply sceptical of modernism because it is highly subjective and therefore cannot lock into the objective reality of social and material conditions in the way that realism does. Adorno takes the opposite view that it is modernism that offers a mode of representation that captures social and emotional fragmentation, the

"liquidation of individual and collective agency" (24). Therefore it is only logical that in the relatively hopeful period before 1967, realism should reign supreme, whereas modernist techniques and attitudes becomes a feature of the post-1967 landscape. For Abu-Manneh, Adorno and Lukács function on a theoretical continuum, more aligned than disparate in outlook: both theorists think in terms of the revolutionary potential of the text, the manner in which it registers and expresses history.

For postcolonial studies, it is the use of Adorno in relation to the jointly written text – Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and Abdelrahman Munif's untranslated *World without Maps* (1982) – that is particularly appealing. As a discipline postcolonialism has largely ignored or dismissed Adorno as being too Eurocentric and elitist to be of any theoretical use. In spite of this however, there is a small (but noble) band – Asha Varadharajan; Keya Ganguly; Robert Spencer; Deepika Bahri; Neil Lazarus – who have attempted to counter this view, and Abu-Manneh belongs to this cohort, acknowledging that to relegate Adorno to the "periphery" of the discipline is not only unhelpful but intellectually disingenuous. Not only does Adorno offer a solid materialist framework to read postcolonial texts, but his faith in modernism as an appropriate or natural response to "surrounding conditions of repression and catastrophe" (137) makes him ideal in a reading of Palestinian modernism. Abu-Manneh is correct in evoking Adorno, for "In a world where a reified society has degenerated into total administration and manipulation, and where forms of solidarity and collective action have been crushed, modernist art negates and resists" (136). Adorno acknowledges the revolutionary potential of modernism – modernism as form as praxis.

In short this book is a brave and fascinating endeavour to engage with the Palestinian novel through a materialist framework while giving equal weight to history and aesthetic form.