Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham


On April 2014, a young Iraqi writer, Ahmad al-Saʿdawi, won the Arab “Booker” award for his novel _Frankenshtain fi Baghdad_ (Frankenstein in Baghdad). Among the six novelists on the “short list,” there was another Iraqi, Inʾam Kajaji. The award was a belated recognition by the Arab literary establishment of the significant advances in Iraqi literature since 2003, and the novel in particular. Western scholarship has totally ignored the Iraqi novel and the number of articles devoted to Iraqi novels is very small. Therefore, Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham’s book, “The Iraqi Novel,” which is the first major book on the modern Iraqi novel in English, fills a significant gap.

The two lecturers from the Department of Arabic and Persian at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, concentrate on “key” writers and “key” texts in the development of the literary genre of the modern novel in Iraq. They set out to delineate the course of this development from pre-modern attempts by Mahmud Ahmad al-Sayyid, who wrote the first Iraqi novel, and Dhu al-Nun Ayyub, who wrote the first popular Iraqi novel, as well as surveying writers associated with the “1950s Generation” (ʿAbd al-Malik Nuri, Ghaib Tuʾma Farman) and culminating with the mature novels of Fuʾad al-Takarli from the 1980s and 1990s. Iraqi prose was a “battleground” between generations of writers, each asserting itself by rejecting its predecessors. Consequently, there is a lack of continuity, which is a precondition for the formation of an Iraqi literary tradition in prose. Contrary to other literary traditions in the region, notably that of Egypt, there is no prominent writer, similar to Taha Hussein and Naguib Mahfuz, serving as a source of inspiration. Without declaring it, Caiani and Cobham set out to create such a tradition. Their ambition corresponds to a growing need felt by Iraqi intellectuals: the Iraqi writer, ‘Ali Badr, recently published a novel based on _Jalal Khalid_, the first Iraqi novel, in order to outline the continuity between the beginning and the present.

In some respects Caiani and Cobham’s narrative follows accepted lines, already published in similar books in Arabic. Thus, the division of the novel into pre-modern and modern categories, with the latter starting modestly in the 1950s is accepted by most critics. However, Caiani and Cobham, consider ʿAbd al-Malik Nuri as the forefather of the modern novel and this claim should be treated with some caution. Nuri, a central figure of the “1950s Generation,” was apparently the first Iraqi to use and introduce modern literary techniques—such as the stream of consciousness, the inner monologue, and flashback—
into Iraqi prose. That was a clear break from the literature of his predecessors. Caiani and Cobham publish six of Nuri’s short stories to illustrate his innovations. They claim that Nuri has been “largely neglected by critics” (p. xi), though he “inspired” other writers. Nevertheless, Nuri never wrote a single novel. Can Nuri be considered the forefather of the novel without writing a novel? The first modern Iraqi novel, making use of those techniques, al-Nakhla wal-Jiran (The Palm Tree and the Neighbors) was published only in 1966, when Farman, the author, was in exile and Nuri was not in touch with him and past his prime. Cobham and Caiani should have been more convincing, arguing for Nuri as a “revolutionary pioneer” (p. 30).

The authors correctly emphasize the centrality of the 1950s for the development of the novel in Iraq. During their description of this period, Cobham and Caiani deviate from the discipline of literary theory and style into history: the subchapter on “Baghdad Cafes” offers a refreshing glimpse of the literary circles and the atmosphere of the period. Yet the case of the “1950s Generation” calls into question the definition of literary generations. No modern Iraqi novel was published during the 1950s. As the writers show, the circles of intellectuals frequenting the famous cafes in Baghdad were more into talking about novels than writing one. Why should prominent novelists like Ghaib Tu’ma Farman (who published his first novel in 1966) or Fu’ad al-Takarli (who published his first novel in 1980) be considered part of the “1950s Generation?” These writers do not write exclusively about the 1950s so what defines their association with it? Unfortunately, Cobham and Caiani do not sufficiently explore this issue and simply accept the writers own desire for this generational affiliation.

Later chapters discuss specific texts by three prominent Iraqi novelists from the 1970s to the 1990s: Ghaʾib Tuʾma Farman, Fuʾad al-Takarli and Mahdi ʿIssa al-Saqr. The inclusion of al-Saqr is particularly welcome, since this exceptional writer, who lived all his life in Iraq and wrote his daring and profoundly humanistic novels under the Baʿth, was ignored by Western and Arab scholars. All these writers are associated with the “1950s Generation,” but started writing and publishing novels much later.

The book is based on several articles that have been previously published in scholarly journals, and thus there is an inconsistency in the level of the analysis throughout the book. Some of the material is very sharp (such as the chapter on al-Takarli’s al-Masarrat wal-Awjaa (Joys and Sorrows)), while other parts of the book are wanting. The epilogue, briefly discussing the influence of the early literary pioneers on current Iraqi novelists, was also written casually and totally omits the dramatic changes introduced by the “1990s Generation,” of which Ahmad al-Saʿdawi is a member. This book is heavily rooted in literary theory and at times almost completely loses touch with the historical background.