Tarek El-Ariss


Tarek el-Ariss’ Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political has achieved a rare feat for academic works: it participates in and extends one of the most relevant and ongoing debates in Arabic literary studies, which Stephen Sheehi recently dubbed Nahda Studies, while remaining pertinent to the fields of comparative literature and postcolonial studies. It engages with theoretical questions, notably debates over modernity, while remaining accessible, even enjoyable, for undergraduate students. This wide-ranging study reads nineteenth-century Arabic travel narratives alongside the aesthetics of hacking in the contemporary Egyptian novel in a framework that draws on affect theory, psychoanalysis, questions of the political in the ‘Arab Spring’, and queer theory—to name just a few. Despite this breadth, however, el-Ariss’ approach feels neither forced nor scattered. To the contrary, the author deploys his well-honed reading method to skillfully demonstrate the thesis of his work: that established concepts of the ‘modern’ in Arabic literature overlook a range of dynamic aesthetic experiments centering around affect, the body and language. In the process, el-Ariss opens up Arabic literary studies to exciting new questions and methods. These achievements were deservedly acknowledged with the award of an ALA (American Library Association) Choice ‘Outstanding Academic Title’.

The primary claim of Trials of Arab Modernity lies in el-Ariss’ re-conceptualization of modernity, which he argues must be untethered from two interlinked notions: that of innovation or progress, corresponding to the ihdath of nahda

intellectuals, and that of academic scholarship, which continues to locate the ‘modern’ in Arabic literature in a fixed time period and corresponding set of ideological debates, canonical works (e.g., the trilogy of Naguib Mahfouz) and political struggles. In place of these accounts of modernity, which el-Ariss argues are static and risk perpetuating worn-out binaries (e.g., East/West, tradition/modernity), the author advances the concept of ahdath. This term shares an etymological root with modernity and modernization but dispenses with the teleological and Eurocentric implications of these concepts. As ahdath, Arab modernity comes to embrace the broad and arbitrary signification of the event, the episode, the incident, even the accident or catastrophe. In pursuit of these instances, el-Ariss identifies in literary texts ‘a series of practices, rhythms, techniques, and encounters’ that focus on affect, sound and the body and, in so doing, allow us to discern a modernity proper to the Arabic textual tradition: one that is open-ended and that ceaselessly interrogates and upsets the borders of any normative notion of the modern (172).

El-Ariss develops his account of Arab modernity through readings of literary texts, arranged chronologically and spanning the nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries. Trials of Arab Modernity opens with two nahda texts that center around the theme of travel: Rifa’a al-Tahtawi’s account of Paris, Takhlis al-ibriz fi talkhis Bariz [An imam in Paris: al-Tahtawi’s visit to France, 1826–1831], which is traditionally seen as the inaugural text of the nahda, and Faris al-Shidyaq’s comparable account of England and France, Kashf al-mukhabbaʾ ‘an funun urubba [Revealing the hidden arts of Europe], which is a much lesser known text in the North American academic setting. These chapters of the book will be of particular value for comparative readings of Arabic literature insofar as they approach these aesthetically complex and, some would argue, generically unclassifiable texts at the intersections of literary traditions. El-Ariss’ readings are replete with references to classical Arabic poetry and medieval Islamic travel literature, Baudelaire and Benjamin, Kafka and Adorno.

The nahda intellectual’s voyage to Europe sets the stage for el-Ariss’ account of Tayyeb Salih’s Season of Migration to the North, which is well-known in North American and European classrooms as a postcolonial novel. This popularity can be at least partially attributed to Saleh’s references to the European literary tradition. But el-Ariss’ ahdath lens, while acknowledging the intertextual richness of the novel, makes the important contribution of situating it in a post-independence Arabic literary context that points up a colonial trauma suspended between Europe and Africa and that, in el-Ariss’ reading, ineluctably disrupts the binaries of East/West. The author’s focus on affect permits him to restore a crucial but often overlooked scene of violence that lingers, silenced, in the background of the novel: the Battle of Omdurman. By demonstrating