Valerie Anishchenkova


This is a rich, provocative, and welcome contribution to the study of modern Arab autobiographical representations. Valerie Anishchenkova purposely goes beyond what might be termed ‘conventional’ autobiographies and instead focuses her first three chapters on literary works that she considers implicitly autobiographical, in particular autobiographical novels. In the final two chapters, she then broadens her analysis still further to include film and online blogs. In each chapter she seeks to define what she terms ‘modalities of autobiographical transmission’, offering a typology that includes nationalism, corporeal, multicultural, cinematographic and virtual/cyber. Her primary goal is ‘to offer an analytical framework to contemporary Arab autobiographical discourse by investigating cultural production that articulates novel conceptions of Arab selfhood and highlights complex sociocultural, ideological, and other non-narrative discourses behind identity construction’ (p. 2). This is an analysis that will interest both scholars of traditional autobiography as well as a much broader readership of those interested in new cultural formations and identities in the modern Arab world.

Although some scholars have noted a decline in the production of conventional autobiographies in Arabic in the late twentieth century, Anishchenkova argues that there has been a related dramatic increase in the production of autobiographical representations in autobiographical novels and other forms of literature. By writing works that are not explicitly autobiographies, ‘authors can exercise more freedom of self-expression while avoiding scrutiny from their readers for being untruthful’ (p. 9).

In the first chapter, the modality of nationalism is examined in Hanna Minah’s *Baqāyā ṣuwar* (*Fragments of Memory*) and Layla Abouzeid’s *ʿĀm al-fīl* (*Year of the Elephant*). Anishchenkova reads the adult narrator’s voice in the
former work as ‘a decolonized subject who speaks of and for his childhood subaltern past’ (p. 42). In an interesting, though rather convoluted argument, she says of Minah’s choice to write the novel in standard Arabic (fuṣḥā), ‘[T]he discursive contradiction of voicing Minah’s subaltern protagonist in a hegemonic language subverts traditional power structures’ (p. 44). The various attitudes and reactions to the Ottoman and then French colonial regimes are seen reflected in three secondary figures in the young narrator’s life—two uncles, one anti-Ottoman and one struggling against local authorities, and the third, a female neighbor Zanuba, who actively resists the French colonial forces.

In contrast, Zahra, the protagonist of Year of the Elephant is analyzed as the author’s ‘subaltern alter ego … an interesting case of post-colonial identity-making where the autobiographer reimagines herself as a colonized subject … who Abu Zayd could have been had she been born into different circumstances’ (p. 60) [italics in the original]. Here nationalist ideology is overtly articulated; indeed some passages in the novella are so politically charged that their rhetoric can be likened to political pamphlets. Although this work is read by many scholars as a ‘distinctly female text’, Anishchenkova counters with an argument that, on the contrary, the text leans toward ‘masculine discourse’ (p. 62). In both texts, religion (in one case Christianity and the other Islam) is seen as ‘the primary catalyst for both decolonization and nationalization’ (p. 69).

Chapter 2 examines the corporeal modality through the examples of Muhammad Shukri’s al-Khubz al-hāfī (Plain bread) and Nazik Saba Yarid’s Taqāsīmʿalā watār ḍāʾi (Improvisations on a missing string). Examining the body—its sexuality and its aesthetics—as a more prominent site of identity-formation in modern Arabic autobiographical representations, the author sees Shukri’s work as a ‘sophisticated mockery and caustic antithesis of the conventional Bil-dungsroman’ (p. 83), which is instead based upon a spiritual, intellectual and essentially ‘bodiless’ mode of identity construction. In contrast, Shukri’s narrative returns again to details of harsh physicality, with graphic depictions of sex and violence. Yarid’s work, on the other hand, is narrated in non-chronological flashbacks from a hospital bed, where the protagonist is recovering from a mastectomy. Not only her disease, but also her intense lifelong ‘dis-ease’ with her body, which she perceives as fat, dark-skinned and ugly, render the corporeal dimension of her being the primary site of her identity-formation and of her narrative.

The third chapter compares three texts in which displaced, exiled and multicultural selves are represented. Sumayya Ramadan’s Awrāq al-narjis (Leaves of narcissus) is narrated in fragments by three distinct avatars of the protago-