Jumana Bayeh


We should not judge a book by its cover, and in times when publishers require their books’ titles to be optimized for search engines, rather than for readers, we should not judge it by its main title either. Bayeh’s study is not a comprehensive overview of the literature of the Lebanese diaspora from Jibran Khalil Jibran to Milton Hatoum, nor is it concerned with drama or poetry. Rather, Bayeh offers a thorough analysis of five novels—written in English, with one exception—published between 1996 and 2009, whose aim is to question notions of place, home and homeland, as these have developed in the field of diaspora studies since the 1990s.

Bayeh’s main argument seeks to challenge a notion of diaspora which is little concerned with place or location. Much of diaspora studies is based on the very specific case of the Jewish diaspora and therefore works on the premise of a stable notion of the home or homeland and a longing for return. Starting out from a more fluid conception of home and diaspora, as exemplified in the works of James Clifford, Lily Cho and Edward Said among others, she argues that diasporans, by virtue of a ‘double consciousness’ (Dayal 1996) are particularly well-equipped to note the inconsistencies and contradictions inherent, for instance, in the static conceptions of place common in diaspora studies.

The three parts of her book explore different kinds of places through literary works. The (war-torn) city of Beirut is the analytical focus for Tony Hanania’s Unreal City (1999) and Rawi Hage’s DeNiro’s Game (2006). Domestic space stands at the center of Bayeh’s readings of Somewhere Home by Nada Awar Jarrar (2003) and The Night Counter by Alia Yunis (2009). Finally, the representation of the nation-state is examined via Amin Maalouf’s Ports of Call (Les Échelles du Levant, 1996).

Bayeh’s study is at its strongest where it deals with the literary texts. She accomplishes the difficult task of explaining a century of Lebanese history and the country’s sociopolitical structure for those unfamiliar with Lebanon, even while she develops a sophisticated argument. The fact that she maintains a certain critical distance—not shying away from calling Jarrar’s representation of home ‘intensely regressive’ (p. 133)—makes for a refreshing read for anyone coming from the field of Arabic literature, where criticism is too often limited to showcasing the authors’ literary qualities.

Each of these chapters could stand very well on its own and make a significant contribution to the field of Lebanese post-civil war fiction. However, their
connections to the overall argument are not always convincing. The connection is clearest in respect to the readings of Jarrar’s and Yunis’s novels. Bayeh does a very good job of showing the complexity and mobility inherent in the representations of home, which hardly fit with the notion of a homeland to which return is possible. Bayeh’s analysis of Maalouf’s *Ports of Call* makes a strong case for the inadequacy of an approach that conceives of the homeland in terms of a nation-state with fixed boundaries, as many diaspora scholars envision it. Still, a more critical assessment of Maalouf’s ‘Levantinism’, which pairs colonial nostalgia with a utopian narrative of peaceful co-existence, might have been called for, if only to make clear that a narrative in which France appears as ‘the saviour of the Levant’ (p. 212) is at best problematic. When it comes to representations of the city in *DeNiro’s Game* and *Unreal City*, however, the connection is much less compelling. Bayeh’s argument is that a specifically Christian city space is being challenged in Hage’s novel. To my mind, Bayeh’s reading of Hage’s novel is better described as a thorough and convincing analysis of the deconstruction of a Christian civil war narrative. Taken on its own, it is nonetheless one of the strongest sections of the book.

Undeniably, Bayeh’s focus on place from a perspective of diaspora studies has led her to original and insightful readings of recent Lebanese literature, which makes her book a worthwhile read. However, the study in some ways runs the danger of essentializing the diasporic condition, thereby working against the author’s stated aims. Her argument implicitly assumes a kind of diasporic consciousness or ‘diasporic subjectivity’ (p. 211), which endows the diaspora writer with a unique capacity for critique. Yet, nowhere does Bayeh define what actually makes a writer diasporic, beyond the experience of displacement. The reader is left to wonder why ‘diaspora’ writers publishing in Arabic, like Hannan al-Shaykh or Hoda Barakat are completely absent from the study, even though their works have been the subject of readings focused on representations of space (for instance Cobham 1994; Aghacy 1998, 2003). It is probably also this notion of a diasporic consciousness that kept the author from engaging with the substantial literature on the construction of space in the Lebanese post-civil war novel more generally, for instance in the works of Iman Humaydan, Hassan Daoud, Rabī’ Jabir, Vénus Khoury-Ghata and Sélèm Nassib (e.g., Junge 2010; Moster-Eichberger 2010; Seigneurie 2003, 2011; Winckler 2010). Although many of these authors do not share in the so-called diasporic consciousness, their novels can be (and have been) read as challenges to received notions of city-space, home or nation.

Ultimately, the Lebanese case may serve to take Bayeh’s argument about the fluidity of notions of diaspora even further. Most Lebanese authors are to some degree de-territorialized, many have experienced frequent relocation within