

# Preface

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## PREFACE

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At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the literature produced by Middle Eastern writers who had emigrated or been exiled from their home countries played an important role in the spread of new ideas and innovative political and social thought in the Middle East. Turkish nationalism or the quest for democracy within the Ottoman Empire, ideas of social justice or a new concept of the individual, for example, can hardly be thought of without the impulses that came from the diaspora then.

The situation at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in many respects resembles that of a century ago. The political, economical, social and ideological conditions in West Asia and North Africa have caused many writers to leave their countries and settle in the West. Here, lively literary activity can be observed. Many writers go on writing in their mother tongue, producing literature primarily for a reading public in the Middle East or the diaspora community. Others switch to writing in the language of the host country. In both cases, the distance from the country of origin often encourages writers to tread new ground, exploring and experimenting with new themes and forms, breaking taboos prevailing in their home countries (especially where sexuality, religion, and social and political order are concerned), and developing new ideas. In some cases, diaspora has ensured a Middle Eastern literature's very survival (under Saddam Husayn, for instance, non-panegyric Iraqi literature was produced almost exclusively outside Iraq); in others, the works of diaspora authors have been able to challenge the literary canon of their home countries. Furthermore, if a language switch has taken place, stimulating frictions can be witnessed in the literary landscape of the host countries.

In March 2005, an international conference that focussed on this kind of literature was held in Berne, Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> The papers given at the meeting as

1 The conference was organized by the European Association for [the Study of] Modern Arabic Literature (EurASMAL, now EURAMAL), the Institute for Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Berne, and the Schweizerische Gesellschaft Mittlerer Osten und Islamische Kulturen / Société Suisse Moyen Orient et Civilisation Islamique (SGMOIK/SSMOCI). The conference program is still available online from a EURAMAL website: <<http://folk.uio.no/guthst/bern05.pdf>>.

well as the statements by the authors who had been invited also dealt, it is true, with the *problems* resulting from living in exile and/or as a member of the diaspora – life as a foreigner, experiencing marginalization, identity crises, etc. They did not stop here, however, but went on to explore the *creative and innovative potential* that is equally inherent in the exile / diaspora situation, and gave insight into the processes of its emergence and development. This potential is all the more significant since writers (and intellectuals in general) of the diaspora are creating alternatives which can serve as models once the actual conditions in North African and West Asian countries have changed, or which are already contributing to bringing about change from a distance. Moreover, as agents of mediation, diaspora authors may differentiate or, as the case may be, correct the images the West and the East are constantly producing of each other. In doing so, they often show the way, in their host countries, to integration and possibilities of creatively appropriating elements of the cultures involved.

With this kind of program, the conference also aimed to enrich the current discussions about the behaviour of local cultures in global contexts. It profited from the research, already existing and far advanced, on exile, diaspora and migrant literatures, in general and on the Arab, Turkish and Iranian diaspora in particular; it focussed, however, though not exclusively, on literature *written in the mother tongue* of the Middle Easterners, since this aspect had been rather neglected so far by scholarly research.

While specialists of modern Arabic, Persian and Turkish literature spoke *about* diaspora/exile writers and writing in a diaspora/exile situation, and while discussants from the fields of non-Oriental studies, e.g. English, French, and Comparative Literature who have shown interest in diaspora literature written in non-Oriental languages, enriched the discussions with their experience and ideas, the *authors* who had been invited contributed by talking about their individual experiences as writers of the diaspora. Hanan AL-SHAYKH (originally from Lebanon, now living in London), Mahshid AMIRSHAHY (Iran, now Paris), Yusuf YEŞİLÖZ (Turkish Kurdistan, now Switzerland), and Feridun ZAİMOĞLU (second generation of Turkish immigrants, Germany), all read from their writings and commented their texts in cultural soirées that were open to the public. As in many of the ‘academic’ conference sessions, here too contributions dealt with the literary life in exile / the diaspora, with journals, societies and clubs, cultural centres, publishing houses, but also with the reception of diaspora literature ‘back home,’ including the question whether or not this literature is possibly crowding out home-grown Arabic, Persian, Turkish productions. During these readings and discussions it became evident, again, that the exile/diaspora situa-

tion is not only and not always a state of suffering but also stimulates creativity and thus very often becomes a ‘think tank’ where new ideas about politics, religion or the social order are developed, where literary traditions of the home country come to be influenced by, or themselves influence, those of the host countries, being challenged and challenging, overlapping, competing, where languages meet and interact, where questions of identity and history are negotiated, where sometimes a self-orientalization takes place which, however, is often critically reflected and treated with a lot of humor – not the least of those creative forces which the diaspora/exile seems to have a special affinity to because it helps to overcome, or at least deal with, the many contradictions inherent in a double-coded existence. It is exactly this multi-faceted identity that endows diaspora writers, exiles, and we may certainly add also those writers with a migrant background, with a special gift – the ability to act as agents of mediation between the cultures.

The contributions brought together in this issue of *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* clearly mirror these many aspects. They are quasi-summarized in Baian RAYHANOVA’s survey of the poetic œuvre of the Syrian author A. S. al-AḤMAD who had lived, studied and worked in Argentina, France, Russia, and Bulgaria (to name only his longest stays away from Damascus). Most of the other contributions focus more on single works or aspects rather than giving a broad overview. Sobhi BOUSTANI’s study of Ḥanān AL-SHAYKH’s novel *Innahā London yā ‘azīzī* (translated into English as “Only in London”), for example, follows the heroine’s attempt to become more British than the British, an attempt that after a lot of ups and downs ends with her failure to achieve this ambitious goal. The failure, however, seems to be necessary in order to pave the way for something new (a second round?). The importance of Boustani’s study also lies in his disclosure of the continuity this text displays, in spite of the novelty of the ‘life in the diaspora’ topic and the space in which the events take place, in comparison to Ḥanān AL-SHAYKH’s earlier writings, which had been written when the author was still living in the Middle East.

In contrast to most of the texts dealt with in the present issue, those studied by Andreas PFLITSCH are written in English and far more experimental in style than, e.g., al-Shaykh’s “Only in London”. Yet, the heroes and heroines face very similar problems concerning their identity, belonging and fitting. The fragmented nature of their existence is mirrored in the textual structure, in a fragmentation, a multitude of voices and/or of attempts to define their identity. But a similar phenomenon can also be found in Ghāda AL-SAMMĀN’s Arabic-language collection of short stories, *al-Qamar al-murabbaʿ*, by the way; here the “agony

of the exiled soul” – as Christina VOGEL who examines this text has it – is expressed in a similarly complex, fragmented, multi-voiced and multi-faceted narrative. Interestingly enough, the heroine of another English-language novel, Rabih ALAMEDDINE’s *I, the Divine* (2002) somehow repeats the process al-Shaykh’s protagonist Lamīs goes through in that she, too, fails to achieve her initial goal but in the end realizes, like Lamīs, that her failure is not necessarily a failure: a multiple and fragmented identity can still be an identity.

Palestinian writer Murīd AL-BARGHŪTHĪ goes even a step farther perhaps, as Monica RUOCCO shows in her contribution. He advances his situation of exile – the *ghurba* “displacement”, as he calls it – onto an aesthetic and maybe even epistemological level when he considers an author’s physical exile to be also a separation from “the habitual, the pattern and the ready form” in general and thus a starting-point for an “escape from the chains of the collective and the tribal approvals and taboos” – and, thus, a precondition of becoming really free. In her study of ADUNIS’s poetry, Francesca Maria CORRAO takes the development of the famous Arab poet’s production after he settled in Paris as an example for the fact that the new environment not only enforced the author’s Western inclinations but, simultaneously, encouraged his going back to the classical Arabic poetic traditions, a process of melting into each other of cultural traditions which – in its turn, but in another way than that of Alameddine’s characters – is not dissimilar to the one al-Shaykh’s Lamīs undergoes in “Only in London”: starting as almost anti-Arab, she too ends up with a heightened appreciation of her native language and culture, just like Adunis with his.

Like Andreas Pflitsch, Özkan EZLİ attends to those writers who, strictly speaking, are certainly neither exiles nor can they properly be described as living in the diaspora. Either they have grown up in Europe (mostly as children of migrant workers), generally are bilingual and have not chosen their parents’ language but English, French or German as their literary idiom, or else, for some other reason, they have decided to express themselves in the language of their new home countries after immigration. It turns out however that for this group too the incentives to write are quite similar to the identity problems which can be observed, again, with Hanan al-Shaykh’s or Rabih Alameddine’s protagonists. But there is also a difference. The very specific and innovative literary language they create – which is not Arabic, Turkish or Persian, but a modified, modulated, transformed, ‘hybrid’ *European* language – causes serious frictions in the literary milieus of these Western languages’ home countries and thus questions outdated previous ascriptions of national or cultural identity. As a matter of course, displacement, exile, the lack of a sense of belonging of the diaspora, and of ‘fit-

ting' of the migrants and their children and grand-children, is not in itself automatically a source of creativity, as Boutros HALLAQ reminds us in the introduction to his essay. This said, however, he continues with a look back into the history of modern Arabic literature in which he highlights the importance a European capital (Paris) has had for the development of an Arabic literary modernity, as exemplified in four major works of the formative period between 1855 and 1940 (AL-SHIDYĀQ's *al-Sāq 'alā 'l-sāq*, J. Kh. JUBRĀN's *al-Ajniha al-mutakassira*, M. H. HAYKAL's *Zaynab*, and M. MAS'ADĪ's *Haddatha Abū Hurayra qāl...*). Yet another dimension is added by Paola VIVIANI's study of a text by the Egyptian Bahā' Ṭāhir. In his case, the long period he spent living in Switzerland sharpened his senses for processes that were taking place in his home country, with the result that he came to feel himself as an exile again, a stranger among foreigners, when he returned, after two decades abroad, to an Egypt that had changed so much in the meantime that he felt no longer to belong there.

All in all, this conference illustrates something of the many-sided, ambiguous, bitter-sweet experience of exile and diaspora and of the manifold responses it calls forth among poets, novelists and short story writers from the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean. The subject is vast, and the editors and contributors hope that these papers will stimulate further investigations of this literature. In our world, where more and more people are on the move, and where governments and certain circles among the population at large consider exiles, refugees and foreign workers with ever more suspicion, diaspora voices are precious witnesses which deserve to be heard and understood.

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