



Literary Studies in the Arab World in the 21st Century

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Scope and challenges

The two decades of the current century have witnessed a notable expansion in publishing in the Arab world. This includes the academic field of literary studies. But the real explosion has taken place in the production of literature, particularly fiction. There are number of reasons for this. Chief among them are developments in the publishing industry, self-publishing, and the internet. But the financial autonomy of the Arab writer or Arab academic is still in the far horizon. Copyrights remain, largely, a jungle. This state of affairs raises problems of representatively and comprehensiveness, and therefore affects the possibility of meaningful conclusions and statements in projects such as this one. A background paper on the state of literary studies in the Arab world, which is also sensitive to the multilingual aspects of such production, as a well as to the input of Arab diaspora, risks being reductive and partial.

The diversity of the region in terms of linguistic, cultural and institutional makeup pertaining to the production and circulation of the humanities in general and literature in particular needs to be taken seriously. For example, the Maghreb is perceived to have had closer ties to French theory; Egypt and Lebanon enjoyed closer ties to the American context; in the Gulf region, private education as commodity has facilitated the marketization of education and attracted considerable interest by Euro-American institutions and foreign students. This has affected the educational settings of the humanities and resulted in diverse output across the region in film, theatre and the arts studies as well as in cognate humanities disciplines such as philosophy and history. The travel of these humanities across the region has been uneven and somewhat limited. But this has not been the case for literature. This paper argues that, for reasons of language, history and identitarian stakes, literature remains a more shared heritage than other humanities practices across the region. This has resulted in a ubiquitous presence of literary studies in teaching and dissemination outside educational institutions. For this reason, separating literature from literary studies can be quite arbitrary and perhaps even ill advised. The two aspects outlined here, namely, volume and spread, pose real challenges and problems of methodology.

One basic challenge encountered during research, which is revealing of the state of academia in the Arab world, has to do with accessibility to data. Connectivity is uneven across the region. Online debates about it, if found, either pertain to the theory of criticism or to the historical practices of sociocultural criticism. For Syria, for example, mention may be made of Hama University, Damascus University, and several other academic institutions. But these are not webpages detailing programs of study in this field but PDF files of assigned readings hosted on the university websites. There are, however, some resources online, which are comprehensive, such as, Iraqi Academic Scientific Journals (<https://www.iasj.net/>), and Algerian Scientific Journal Platform (<https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en>). These are genuinely impressive open access data bases produced in both countries and fully state-funded. These two data initiatives are models to be highlighted and emulated.

Methodology

The research strategy adopted in this project is two-fold. It attempts an overview of literary studies in the Arab world before 2011 and since and, concurrently, tests some frames and hypotheses for the purposes of analysis. In order to achieve this, the paper benefits form surveys of sample curricula, publications in Arabic mainly, and institutions of literature. It also takes

into account the views of practitioners – academics and relevant stakeholders in literary studies - through a mixture of oral and written interviews.¹

Having said that, the paper occasionally zeroes in on examples from across the region as relevant. For example, Syria exemplifies the dismantling of well-established institutions of literature since 2011; Tunisia testifies to the freeing of expression and its consequences; the Gulf region has emerged as a powerhouse affecting literature and literary studies well beyond the confines of the states themselves. Unlike traditional overviews and introductory works, which canonise a particular narratives, such as the triumph of the novel as genre and traditional centres of activity, such as Egypt, one aim is to deliberately visibilize marginal and overlooked practices in the Arab region (Libya).

The ultimate ambition is to engage with seminal thinking about the field over the past two decades in Arabic literary studies, whether emerging from the Arab World or from abroad. And while producing a bibliography for such a vast field is not straightforward, in light of the mass of publications in a number of languages, a select bibliography and list of resources will be provided as appendix.

Literature and literary studies in the context of the humanities

Over the past two decades, and more prominently since 2011, the Arab World has been the location of a global phenomenon related to the humanities. It consists in a remarkable, perhaps even unique, paradox.

1. The Arab region has become the graveyard of the humanities or the place where “the humanities go to die.” Among the manifestations of this violence directed against the human sciences, arts, material heritage, creativity and rational knowledge, are the rise of anti-humanities discourse and violence against humanity itself. The discourse and practices prohibiting the arts, destroying antiquities, and targeting artists has spread beyond its usual frameworks in the region to engulf societies known for their relative openness to the humanities, such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Tunisia. Examples have been widely mediatized. All of this has been taking place in a time marked by religious intolerance compounded with political authoritarianism, financial corruption and rampant consumerism. Within this context, the pair practices and discourses of *takfir* (thinking) and *tafkir* (apostasy) can perhaps summarise the mood.

Instances where literature and academics and critics have been subjected to *takfir* are perhaps too numerous to list.

Takfir, broadly speaking, has become the dominant charge levelled against the outside Other as well as what is considered the Other within, namely, secular and critical humanist thought. I'll take one example from academic literary studies, which speaks to a state of mind on the eve of the revolutions and would find telling manifestations since.

¹ Interviews with M.J. Al-Musawi; Omar Moqdad Jemni; Ali Ahmida; Kenza Sifrioui; Julie Blalak; Fadhila al-Farouk; Youmna El-Aid and informal conversations with several other scholars and writers.

The book *al-'inhiraf al-'aqa'idi fi adab al-hadatha wa fikriha:dirasa naqdiyya shar'iyya* (Deviation from the Doctrine in the Literature and Thought of Modernity: a critical and theological (*shar'iyyah*) study) by Said ibn Nasir Al-Ghamidi published in Jeddah in a second edition by Dar al-Andalus al-Khadhra', in 3 volumes totalling 2318 pages (2005) was originally a doctoral thesis defended in 1995. Its declared objective is to counter secularism (*"ilmaniyyah"*) in its cultural and literary garb, called modernism (*"hadatha"*) (3). Al-Ghamidi's work discusses the work of over 200 key Arab intellectuals, writers and poets, from Ali Abd al-Razzaq and Taha Husyan to Mahmoud Darweesh and Muhammad Bennis. Its main point and strategy is to show that these, or what the author calls Arab modernists, have "deviated" from the Islamic path. It claims that these intellectuals have been engaged in propagating the wrong ideas in the name of "freedom of thought, the universality of human thought and objectivity".

2. At the same time, the Arab world has become perhaps the epicenter for the birth as well as the re-launching of concepts about human dignity, freedom and justice, which are the very foundation of the humanities and their most supreme goal. The 2011 uprisings have signaled a creative moment in the comprehensive sense of the word; namely, an explosion of creativity and imagination, as well as the emergence of new actors and new forms of expression, which have brought back the hope that history is still in the making. This phenomenon has in a sense created a gap between institutions and practitioners or, for our purposes, between literature and literary studies.

Indeed, in literary studies, there has been an increasing dissonance between pundits and producers, criticism and creation, methodology and mudawwana (corpus), paradigms and production. We may look at this under Unsynchronised temporalities. Some of it has to do with the nature of both practices, as noted in some of the interviews I conducted and surveys of curricula in Arab universities. Literary criticism and research tend to be "conservative" and slow as suggested by Professor of Arabic literature in Tunisia and in the UAE, Omar Mokdad Jemni. He notes that in UAE, for example, the position of literary studies is dire within the dearth of academic research and the deliberate effort to build "knowledge" societies in the country and the region by investing heavily in academic structures, academic ranking and networking. This context favours limited role for Arabic literature and limits it to general surveys designed for students in the sciences on the one hand, and English literature, on the other. Literary theory and comparative literature are virtually absent from curricula. In addition, there is a noticeable decline in the number of students taking these subject, which resulted in closing departments or amalgamating them with others, such as English and cultural studies departments. Such choices have taken place within a conception of progress and modernity put emphasis on sciences and technology and foreign languages. By comparison, in Tunisia, the level of teaching of literature remains quite modern and up-to-date, comparing favourably with Western universities).

A look at curricula in some UEA universities confirms this picture. The literary criticism program at the United Arab Emirates University focuses heavily on the English language ([BA](#), [BA study plan](#); [PhD program](#)). The teaching of Islamic and Emirati literature modules seems to be required but the modules are not extensive . Their presence seems tokenistic in a course that heavily leans on American-style liberal arts modules.

In neighboring King Saud Arabia, King Saud University has an Arabic Linguistics Institute which focuses on Arabic Islamic culture and talāwa ([study plan](#) & [program strategy](#)), which is

mostly geared towards teaching to non-native speakers and less-so teaching literary criticism ([institute manual](#)). Their College of Arts (*ādāb*) has an undergraduate ([BA, study plan](#)), graduate ([MA](#)), and doctoral program ([PhD, study plan](#)). Last year's strategy aimed to have it be in alignment with Saudi Vision 2030 and proposed its adaptation for the job market.²

The idea here is that creative writing, the arts and critical thinking are received differently across the region, which raises the question of state sovereignty in Arabic humanities. So while curricula might strive to construct and sustain a national canon of literature along the nation state borders and requirements, literary studies tend to take as their subject all of Arabic literature. And these moves have real consequences of course. Critic Youma al-Eid notes that in the case of Lebanon, submitting universities and school systems to party or sect or the state is more of a the norm rather than the exception (interview). One scholar of Libya noted the complete submission of literary studies to the official line and to promoting state-backed literature before 2010. Literature tends to be more contemporaneous to its contexts, largely less restrained by state structures in a region where fashioning an acquiescent citizen has been the main work of state institutions, such as universities and schools.

The state of literary studies is intimately tied to languages, and the linguistic situation in the Arab world is paradoxical, uneven and unstable. It is paradoxical in the sense that there is more multilingualism of society and more monolingualization of power across the region. The first has been affected by migration in the Gulf region and by the continued linguistic legacy of colonialism in the Maghreb. The latter can be observed in the top-down Arabization on the one hand and the institutional promotion of English on the other, particularly in recent years. Symptomatic of this linguistic situation is the state of comparative literary studies in the Arab region.

Comparative criticism's beginnings could be seen in universities in Cairo as early as the 1940s. It spread across the Arab world more prominently to be taught as an academic subject in higher education institutions between the 1960s and 1980s. Egypt and Algeria have had more of an institutional focus on comparative criticism. However, a general trend seems to be that comparative criticism is an individual act. If it is taught, it is due to the studies, training, and interest of the academic rather than an institutional one. There are a number of societies and several specialized journals across the region. Mention could be made of Algerian Society of Comparative Literature; the Tunisian society for comparative literature; Saudi society of comparative literature; *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, American University in Cairo; *Muqaranat/Comparisons*, The Egyptian Society of Comparative Literature (ESCL); *Cahiers algeriens de littérature compare*; *al-Adab al-Alamiyya* (Syria); *'Alam al-fikr* (Kuwait); *Thaqafat* (Bahrain).. Founding member of the Tunisian society of comparative literature notes the absence of this area of studies at all levels of university education and structures of research, with the exception of rare Masters in Morocco, Egypt and Qatar and a single research centre in Annaba, Algeria. It is taught only as an elective. Students tend to avoid it while academics find it difficult to justify within the existing rigid and strictly disciplinary structures. Professional societies struggle for funding and recognition, and often function as civil society associations without academic affiliation, which deprives them of funding and logistical support. In terms of research, there has been a steady stream of conferences, colloquia and publications whose impact continues today. This effort is due to figures like Ferial Ghazoul (AUC), Husam al-Din

² هناك حاجة ماسة لاستحداث هذا البرنامج في ضوء ما أسفرت عنه نتائج دراسة استطلاع رأي سوق العمل؛ حيث توجد فرص وظيفية كبيرة لخريجي البرنامج.

al-Khatib (Damascus), Ahmed Etman (Cairo), Saad al-Bazei (Saudi Arabia) and others. Production remains limited, specialised and seeks to circulate within global comparative and world literature contexts. Overall, Arabic literature and foreign literatures remain largely separate fields with little interaction, which affects multidisciplinary and transnational studies.

Revolutionary turn?

What we might call revolutionary turn – even only to have an analytical marker – brought this dissonance discussed above to prominence. In terms of production, it shook what we might describe as self-absorbed writing and the metaliterary, such as *nouveau roman* and self-reflexive fiction, and allowed the return of history and story in literature. The first has taken two forms, historical fiction and consciousness of the workings of a historical society and socially rooted individuals. The second is represented by life writing and individual life stories, whether singular or ordinary - memoirs, testimonies. Literature of incarceration or prison literature has witnessed an explosion in Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Syria.³ . Subjectivity was back on the agenda. With that came both utopian imagination and dystopian melancholy or mourning. In all cases, it was a moment of the return of the repressed during a window, which would prove rather short in most of the Arab region. The list of IPAF prize-winning novels, for example, highlights both trends (the dystopic *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the historical-realist *The Italian* and *Bamboo Stick...*).⁴ Critics argue it is too early to understand any deep impact revolutions may have had on literature. But the hidden history of the pre-revolution period has been revealed through this literature, making it possible to revise dominant narratives and discourses.

In terms of approaches, in Western academia, since 2011 Arabic literature could no longer be seen as location or a linguistic context as philologist and traditional criticism saw it, and became an important chronotope where time and place intersected in ways that called for global attention and new methodologies. Interest in translation from Arabic grew and so has interest in going beyond Area Studies paradigms. Locally, literary studies were caught up in structures and institutions, which sustained either authoritarian systems or neo-liberal policies. Part of this was a marginalisation of critical theory; continued training in applied theory, and maintaining a canon tailored to control and consolidate each specific society. This has been expressed in curricula, structures of patronage and publishing practices. Since 2011, literary studies have struggled to catch up with literature – in places like Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. In many cases, literary studies turned their back on contemporary literature. The case of Libya is instructive. The pre-2011 regime was notoriously hostile to the university and to independent institutions of learning, argues historian Ali A. Ahmida in an interview. The outcome was tightly controlled humanities and hostility towards Libyan literature. After the fall of Gadhafi, two important developments took place. The first was the proliferation of literary production while the second was attempts to highlight absented voices through new journals, such as *'arajin*; anthologies (*The Libya we do not know*, edited by Khaled Mutawa) and online studies devoted to emerging Libyan voices.

³ See for example, Geula Elimelekh, *Arabic prison literature: resistance, torture, alienation, and freedom* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag: Otto Harrassowitz, 2014); Joseph Sassoon, *Anatomy of authoritarianism in the Arab republics*, Joseph Sassoon (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Al-Majri al-Azahar, *al-istibdad fi tunis al-mustaqilla* (Tunis; nuqush arabiyya, 2020).

⁴ See bibliography

One reason for this has to do with what one interviewee called the conservatism of academic literary studies and their slow tempo since they focus on established works of literature that have already been canonised (Jumni). He also notes that literature, in turn, tends to be more conservative, and “perhaps less liberated”, than the arts which adapt faster to events and changes.

We must bear in mind that the revolutions took place within the context of a period marked by new literary and cultural practices heavily impacted by the changing landscape of communications and cannot be separated from it.

Dissemination, old and new media

Literary studies in the Arab world work within a complex publishing and dissemination environment where national and transnational concerns and stakes intersect and often collide. On the one hand, opportunity for publishing is enhanced by opportunities and readership at the Arab-level in light of the shared language and readership. On the other, the political and cultural norms differ greatly across the region, which often results in restrictions imposed by national norms (this is mostly visible in any comparative look at what is permitted in a given national book fair), variety in funding and imbalance in circulation. For example, university publishing in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia tends to have low circulation and poor design. Commercial publishing tends to favour literature over criticism. Some publishers have access to generous funding and strong networks, which allows them strong presence in book fairs and libraries across the region.

Academic specialised publications of university presses suffer from limited circulation, are not necessarily refereed, and poor production quality. One observer spoke of freedom to publish but not to circulate, which has been prevalent in Syria, for example. Academic theses are mostly inaccessible and unpublished. In terms of language, in addition to Arabic and French, publishing in English has become more desirable and value-giving. By and large, peer-reviewed academic publishing is seen a margin, rather than centre of literary criticism. There is noticeable limited peer reviewing and copy-editing, and almost complete absence of indexing. In Arabic literary scholarship, style and key terms are not harmonised across the region. Translating directly from French in the Maghreb; inventing terms and equivalents without consensus due to the absence of a body, which oversees translation across the region. Just like in other fields of economic activity, commercial academic publishing is an informal and parallel sector, largely beyond the oversight of academic norms. (In Tunisia, for example, self-publishing and commercial publishing of academic work are acceptable in university promotion processes).

The rare independent publishers, such as Kenza Sifrioui’s experience in Morocco, are worth highlighting as serious publishing, which is independent, critical, and aims to form a critical mass from the grassroots. The main interest is self-representation, speaking from positions of precarity, addressing one’s own society, “using its codes”, Sifrioui argues in an interview. This is a position that reverses notoriety gained elsewhere, through either translation, global prizes or publishing and then investing it in local contexts of knowledge production, she argues. A

small number of publishers who share similar aims remain precarious and struggle for sustainability.⁵

Self-publishing witnessed unprecedented expansion thanks to the internet and social media, which dominated the past two decades as means of communication. In a region marked by overbearing control on expression, social media in particular provided an opportunity for relatively “unmediated” self-representation and dissemination. Writers and poets availed themselves of it through personal pages, groups and platforms. Tadwin (blogs), dedicated websites for poetry anthologies and prose criticism (blogs), resulting in new genres – see Moroccan critic Saïd Yaqtin engaged with this phenomenon in his book, *al-nass al-mutarabit wa mustaqbal al-thaqafah al-arabiyya* (2005 and 2012). He seeks to develop ways of studying interactive literature based in digital media. Anissa Daoudi noted the linguistic and gender implications of a rising phenomenon of literature of blogs, especially by women (al-Alim etc).⁶ In both cases, it seems that attention needs to focus on the transformations affecting the Arabic language itself (e-Arabic). But while there have been serious attempts at producing such literature in which interconnectivity and interaction are constitutive elements (Muhammad Sanajla and blog-novels by Kame Ayadi, al-Alim and others), direct publishing on the internet of “traditional” literature remain dominant. Studies of this phenomenon are therefore prospective and aim to introduce Western theories and harmonise key words within the Arabic context.

In terms of genre, understandably poetry has been more conducive to digital media, both written and audio-visual. Conferences and colloquia as well as readings are now widely circulated online on shared platforms as well as individual pages and YouTube channels. During the period of confinement, just like elsewhere in the world, academics intensified their online presence, often in the shape of open and free lectures and seminars, book launches and readings, which are too numerous to list. In addition, the internet exacerbated the notorious disregard for copyrights in the Arab region. Critical studies as well original works of literature have become readily available for free, illegal, download.

Movement of theory and method between Arab world and West

In most Western universities, Arabic literature is rarely studied by itself or for itself. It is subject to disciplinary traffic and intersections, on the one hand, and to what might be called a political predicament, on the other. With this in mind.

On the eve of the revolutions, a 2010 volume of *Journal of Arabic Literature* under the interesting title: From Orientalist to Arabists illustrates the interface between theory and Arabic literature at the time.⁴ The essays practice what I would call “applied theory,” in which concepts, theories, or trends are applied to Arabic texts, usually well-known ones. Examples include applications of magical realism (Cooke), specific psychoanalysis concepts (Kennedy), a theory of myth (Bell), and new concepts related to nation, exile, and so forth. This approach contributes

⁵ <https://etlettres.com/>

⁶ See Daoudi, Anissa, “Globalisation and e-Arabic: the emergence of a new language at the literal and figurative levels in *Language contact in times of globalisation* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 61-76. the increase in YouTube book reviews; online book clubs (e.g., one linked to Cairo Diwan bookshop; the Kuwaiti platform for creative writing Takween).

new insights into well-known texts (Haqqi, Mahfuz, Kouni). I suggest that the special issue marks one instance of a wider practice in the field. It demonstrates and performs increasing traffic between Arabic literature and literary and cultural theory whose nature and direction must be looked at carefully.

One stark illustration of this complex relationship between Arabic literary studies in the West and Arabic literary production is the IPAF prize, which has the symbolic as well as financial capital that directly affects the very production and circulation of Arabic literature in ways that are beginning to be discussed only now.

One critic speaks of “Born translated” to denote the constitutive relationship between translation and production of fiction in the aftermath of IPAF. The embedded drive towards consecration abroad and reinvesting that prestige back home is highlighted by Musawi in the case of Arabic and Kenza Sifrioui with respect to Francophone literature of the Maghreb. Linking prizes to translation betrays an extroverted perspective by which literature gains its value from foreign reception rather than local readership. One of my interviewees who is an independent publisher based in Morocco, questions that process and denounces its politics. Leila Slimani, Tahar Ben Jelloun, for example, are actually promoted by French, metropolitan institutions of literature, critics, and publishers. Their reinsertion into Francophone literature of the Maghreb is enabled by this metropolitan position.

An essay devoted to the global readership of the IPAF-winning novel, *Saq al-Bambu (The Bamboo Stalk)* by Sa’ud al-Sanoussi (2012) argues there are other routes to global audiences enabled by prizes but presumed by them.⁷ The main point here is “lateral connectivity” via readers who inhabit a spectrum of proficiency in Arabic and in English, not just one or the other. The idea that because the prize is Arab it acts directly on the world scene/ field. In other words, it intervenes in the world canon –unlike Nobel Prize, which is western consecration of an Arab novelist (Mahfuz). Other prizes carry more symbolic weight than financial reward, such as Mahfuz Prize for the Novel and prizes given by specific states. The Algerian Assia Djebbar prize reflects the multilingual context of Algeria, giving prizes to literature in Arabic, French and Tamazight. It rewards the languages and the multilingualism of Algeria. In this sense, it is inward looking, embedding the local rather than the global. This despite the fact that Djebbar herself wrote in French. In the case of Tamazight, the prize intervenes in the development of a minority and marginalized literature.

Institutionally, the study of Arabic literature has been mainly housed within area studies. One proposition in need of critical elaboration is the assumption that the study of Arabic literature has been area studies’ most prominent casualty, while departments of comparative literature, most recently under pressure from postcolonial studies, have managed to edge it closer to the mainstream of literary studies, especially in the United States. Studies inspired by Said’s critique of Orientalism and postcolonial theory have become almost the norm. But in postcolonial studies, discourse is preferred over form, meaning over construction of meaning, context over text. As a result, while we notice the increasing presence of Arabic literature in the American Comparative Literature Association, for example, in more specialized areas of literary studies, it remains almost absent. (In the 2011 Narrative Society annual conference, there was only one paper related to Arabic out of over 250.). One of my interviewees based in

⁷ Anna Sijka Stanton, “Eyes on the prize; the global readability of an IPAF-winning modern Arabic novel”, *Middle East Literatures*, 2021, vol. 24.no. 1 20-39.

the West and writing in Arabic and in English sees a continuum between Arabists and Arab academics since we are dealing with professional academics of Arabic literature – not critics with a particular ideology or orientalist perspective.

At an intermediate position between this and older philological practices stand projects like the Library of Arabic Literature, funded by UAE and run from NYU-Abu Dhabi devoted to pre-modern and classical Arabic literature. It consists of critical translation of seminal works of *adab* and poetry. The publication is bilingual, allowing Arabic texts to circulate in Arab as well as non-Arab context, although it has been predominantly disseminated in the West. Smaller similar projects focus on nahda period.⁸ One founding member of LAL argues that interest in classical Arabic literature has seen a transformation largely under the impact of “heritage” graduate students, mainly in the US, who helped the field recognise the modern relevance of this heritage. One innovation in this area has been interest in emotions in classical Arabic literature (Julia Bray, for example).

Applying western theory and the legacy resulting from that, from structuralism to poetics and now semiotics appears to be the dominant trend across the Arab region, judged by topics of doctoral research, colloquia and publications. This raises the question of language and which Arabic style and diction due to variety in translating the same concepts. This problem compounded by the absence of rigorous copy-editing and strict peer reviewing, mentioned above.

Youmna El-eid, whose career and influence spans several decades, sums up this encounter and gestation of Arabic criticism by highlighting how structuralism was helpful in valuing literariness in Arabic literature. Yet, she argues that this was insufficient for her purposes since it marginalised what she calls the “living reference” of literature, namely, its social and historical referent crucial to Arabic literature and to Arab societies. She, like many other Arab critics were predominantly part of the broad Arab Left, engaged not only in how to read literature but also in what literature says about society. In other words, they have had interest in literature as a form of knowledge but also as a means of contestation. This attitude to literature, and within literature, has regained momentum since 2010-11.

Traffic in the other direction – translation of Arabic literary criticism into Western languages and use of local theoretical elaboration - is almost non-existent. This is by no means unique to the Arabic in light of the one-directional traffic of critical theory in modern times. Yet, there have been at least one notable rare exception to the lack of global reach of Arabic literary studies as they are practiced within the Arab world. Abdelfattah Kilito is perhaps the most prominent and the most instructive case. Other cases go largely unnoticed, or are now perhaps emerging to light under the turn to decoloniality in the humanities. I mean by the latter discrete attempts at use locally produced approaches to explore Arabic literature in Western or indeed Arabic academia.

There is a paradox in the Kilito case. His influence resides, not in a rigorous academic approach or original research but in the originality of his take on Arabic literature as well as in his style. Like *Season of Migration to the North* for comparative literature and post-colonial studies, and like Mahfouz for the global novel, especially since 1988, Kilito has become over the last two

⁸ For example, *A bilingual Anthology of the Nahda*, ed. Tarek El-Ariss, 2018, PMLA Texts in Translation series.

decades almost unavoidable, or a sort of rite of passage of comparative and world literature as well translation studies. What explains this apparent paradox? After his essay on *Maqamat* in which he makes an original link between literary theory and Classical Arabic literature, largely under the influence of Roland Barthes and classical Arabic criticism, his perspective on a presumed specificity of Arabic literature of the classical period became of significant appeal, particularly to non-specialists. His work has been anthologised, translated and placed on courses syllabi beyond area studies.⁹ Kilito writes in French and in Arabic but mostly in French and from a French department not an Arabic one. This position certainly helped in his circulation in the sphere of global literary studies, and so has translation of his work into English as well as his engagement with classics of Arab and Western texts. Like the Tunisian Taoufik Baccar who influenced generations of academics, these are critics not only academics. For them, as Kilito put it, criticism is a literary genre.¹⁰ They base themselves on texts to create their own literatures. Both share one key feature: they have digested Western, especially French, criticism and Arabic classical literature and freed themselves from both. But while Kilito has been “consecrated” by translation studies and comparative literature, Baccar’s influence remains local and Arab. Both critics emerge from a Maghrebi academic context in which multilingualism was the norm and French criticism was both something to emulate and to transgress.

A more recent project worth noting is Abdallah Ibrahim’s *Encyclopaedia of the Arabic Narrative* (in Arabic), in nine volumes. (2017), sponsored by the UAE. It benefits form Arabic literary studies in two ways, namely the relationship with critical theory and contextualisation under the rubric of cultural system. It covers the entire spectrum of narrative and the *longue duree*, with volumes devoted to women’s literature, literature and colonialism and historical imagination. At a time when encyclopaedic projects seemed destined for irrelevance, the project is actually part of an interesting, and controversial, meeting between ambitious academics and funding from the Gulf (the ambitious historical [Historical dictionary of the Arabic language, based in Doha, is another example) for cultural projects such as IPAF, mentioned above, museums, book fairs and so on.

Conclusions, prospects and recommendations

From the state of the field described above, only a limited number of generalisations would be possible. Chief among these is the widely observed leap of creativity and its contemporaneity in the face of the relative scarcity and conservatism of criticism and study. There is also an imbalance between reading and writing, with noticeable decline in reading and increase in writing. As far as reading is concerned, there has been a rise in alternative reading on non-paper forms, and a marked decline of “traditional” reading. Another area where it is possible to observe trends, which affect the Arab region as a whole, is dynamism at the social and creative levels. This includes shaking the foundations of limits on expression on one side and opening new venues for individual and collective expression on the other. Part of this dynamism is due to generation and gender factors, meaning that Arab societies are young in

⁹ See for example, engagements with Kilito by Marina Warner and Emily Apter. Several of his works have been translated into English and are widely assigned in course syllabi in the UK and the US world literature and translation courses. See bibliography.

¹⁰ Baccar has published only three main books. See Bibliography.

the majority while the presence of women in society and in creativity has been increasingly diverse and more impactful. Literature and literary studies have been particularly fertile ground for the trends mentioned here.

A number of developments in the region converged in order to shake traditional authority and control in the humanities. The two main ones have been advances in information technology and increase in rates of access to it on the one hand, and the so-called Arab revolutions on the other. Granted that both have been unevenly felt across the region but their transformative effects over the past two decades cannot be denied. Institutions, including the university, and individual critics, have lost some of their authority. This has opened doors to new voices and new fora, including independent cultural centres, websites, blogs, with more women and more young people engaging with literature.

Yet, the dominant relationship between literature and literary studies; academics and writers; states and universities; literary theory and curricula; readers and writers has been governed by various shades of– mutual rejection (*tanafur*), suspicion, marginalisation, silencing and corruption. In part, this is a reflection of the societies themselves and the conflicts within them as well as between them and parts of the outside world. Is this a fate or a phase, which lasted beyond its lifetime and usefulness to those who sustained it and benefitted from it?¹¹ Could there be another way? Have the two major factors of revolutions and information technology affect the kinds of relationships? I suggest *tarafud* as a way forward. What do I mean by *tarafud*? And how can it be adopted for the present context? What does technology have to do with its possibility? Are there any instances of *tarafud*?

Tarafud is a term which does not exist as such in Arabic but is coined based on a blending of confluence and *rafid*, confluence in the sense of flowing with and *rafid* which suggests support and generosity. *Tarafud* is then a concept which describes relationships away from hierarchy, domination and one-dimensional traffic. It also describes ideas of giving and hospitality. It is a take on confluence, which privileges connection and collaboration.¹²

The humanities cannot thrive and take root unless they practice *tarafud* between its own branches and practitioners on one level, and with other fields of knowledge, notably social sciences, the natural sciences and information technology. We can think of *tarafud* between literary studies in different Arab nation states; between Arab and Western academia – thanks to Arab diaspora scholars; between literature and literary studies – pressure comes from literature on literary studies, not the other way around as was the case at the nation building

¹¹ The phenomenon of academics who are at the same time writers and poets is worth noting since it affects the economy of literature and its politics. The intellectual authority and position within the movement of production, criticism and reading enjoyed by academics puts other Arab writers in a complicated reality. This has in part affected negatively the relationship between critics and writers. The composition of juries for prizes, presence in conference and book review dynamics have been affected not because there is an intrinsic problem but because of the climate of corruption and sectarianism in universities and in the cultural sphere. Some scathing criticism is included in the book, *Book on universities producing ignorance*. (Wafaa, Ali As'ad, *al-ummiyya al-akadimiyya fi al-fada's al-jami'I al-arabi* One writer/journalist I interviewed is equally scathing of monopoly and corruption in the literary studies.

¹² See Mohamed-Salah Omri, “*min ajl nadhariyah fi al-tarafud al-adabi*” (Towards a theory of literary confluency) in *The comparative lesson and the dialogue of literatures*. (Tunis: Bayt al Hikma, 2015).

moments; between the humanities and the sciences in the academic space, in educational policy, in research, for example, digital humanities and interdisciplinary research ... These can be translated into concrete mechanisms and projects. The foregoing overview points to a number of gaps and problems which can be addressed through broad recommendations. These do not have to be agreed across the region. Some of them are already underway.

- Reduce the gap in the temporalities of literature and literary studies by reconciling Arab universities with their contemporary national literatures. This effort should be driven by the university and literary studies institutions. Recent attempts in Tunisia since 2011.
- Adopt an inclusive definition of literature to include all literatures produced by Arab writers in Arabic, in foreign languages, local languages and dialects. Prizes should follow suit. The example of Assia Djebar prize.
- Improve the study of comparative and world literature in Arab universities. Both should reflect the world we live in as well as intervene in these fields from the perspectives of Arabic literatures. Part of this should be an effort to consolidate the knowledge of foreign languages, mainstreaming them and prioritizing translation, including transferring Arabic literatures into foreign languages and intensifying translation into Arabic.
- Decolonise approaches to literature. Valorise Arabic literary criticism through translation and curricula. Urgent intervention at the local and global levels in order to protect threatened literatures and concurrently support emerging ones. The intensification of exchanges and dialogue between the Arab world and the countries of the “Global South”, especially with those who have gone through states of authoritarianism, social and ethnic violence and democratic transition, because of the overlapping historical paths, similarities in social structures and location in relation to the Western centre. The role of such collaboration in disrupting Western centrality and patterns of knowledge exchange cannot be underestimated.
- Establish rigorous academic publishing practices across the region. This should be in line with established practices elsewhere. Literary scholars are unanimous in highlighting the dangers of commercial publishing and its standards to academic research.
- Harmonize the Arabic translation of key terms and concepts.
- Supporting what I call a counter-migration, or a decolonial framework for the Arab scholar outside the Arab region. By this, I mean calling for a pioneering role in deconstructing and condemning the colonial and Orientalist systems, as well as resisting them. This work is epistemic and political at the same time. Its consequences include pushing for the equitable and peer-based exchange of knowledge; broadening and diversifying comparative experiences; breaking the unbalanced relationship between the centre and the margin; valuing local knowledges (i.e. Arabic and local) and granting them appropriate academic importance. Translating the Arabic humanities into other research languages on a global level, such as English and other major languages, including Chinese and Spanish, might be the headline of this goal. In addition, recognize the need for horizontal networking with other researchers based on agreeing the goals delineated here.
- Establishing a closer and stronger relationship between Arab producers of literature at home and in the diaspora, and exchanging experiences with the common goal to develop and support Arab literatures in the educational field and the community at large, at home and abroad. This would, in turn, promote the harmony, integration and spread of the humanities in general throughout both locations. It is notable that, with the exception of the family and religious spheres, there is a rupture between the two groups (home and diaspora) with regard to the arts, literature and scientific knowledge.

- The need to strengthen the presence of literature, and the humanities as a whole, in any educational reform project, on a horizontal level, that is, the inclusion of the humanities in the curricula of all types of specializations; and on a vertical level, by seeking public and private support for the humanities as a specialty.
- Make full use of information technology to disseminate local Arab literary research. The examples of open-access consolidated databases of research in Iraq and Algeria should serve as a model.

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Select literary studies, mostly chosen for significance and impact and spread across the Arab region.
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