LITERATURE AND NATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

*Edited by Yasir Suleiman
and Ibrahim Muhawi*

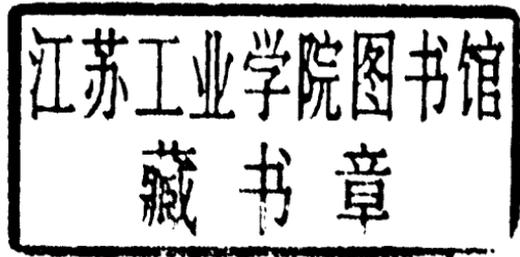# Literature and Nation in the Middle East

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Notes on the Contributors

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Acknowledgements

For Shahla and Jane

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Introduction

Literature and Nation in the Middle East: An Overview

Yasir Suleiman

Aldous Huxley writes that 'nations are to a very large extent invented by their poets and novelists' (1959: 50). Although by talking about 'invention' Huxley may have exaggerated the nature of the link between nation building and literature, this book subscribes to the broad thrust of his statement by examining the role literature plays in constructing, articulating or challenging interpretations of national identities in the Middle East. Thus, most of the chapters in this book are devoted to Arabic literature – here broadly defined as literature in Arabic by Arab writers – owing to the demographic dominance of the Arabs in this part of the world. The remaining chapters delve into Hebrew literature, Arabic literature in translation and Arab literature in its trans-national mode as expressed in a language other than Arabic, in this case English. In terms of genre, the book covers poetry and the novel in their capacity as the prime examples of high culture, as well as oral or 'folk literature' in the modern period as an expression of the localisation of the lived socio-political experience of a national group in a 'here' and 'now' that invokes the heroism of the past. In terms of provenance, a few chapters deal with the literary expression of Palestinian nationalism as the enunciation of a 'stateless' or 'refugee' nation, while other chapters cover the construction of national identity in Egypt, Sudan, Lebanon and Israel, thus providing an array of geographies and socio-political contexts that can add to our understanding of the interaction between literature and the nation in the Middle East. Drama is not dealt with in this volume because of its marginal position in the national cultures of the region, although a study of such playwrights as the Egyptian Tawfiq al-Hakim and Ahmad Bakathir, and the Syrian Sa'dallah Wannus would be revealing in charting the literary expression of the nation in the Arab context. In addition, the volume does not cover the short story or North Africa because of considerations of space.

This book subscribes to a constructivist view of the nation, although it recognises that nation building cannot be an exercise in 'invention', if by invention is meant the fabrication of nations and national identities out of a void. Construction is not necessarily a form of 'myth-making', as it is sometimes made out to be in the literature on nationalism (see Gerber 2004). Construction

is a purposeful activity that requires the identification and selection of existing cultural and experiential material that is reshaped, worked and reworked to advance the cause of the nation as the site of collective identification, allegiance and patriotism. Such material must answer to the criterion of resonance, in that it must 'strike a chord' with those at whom it is directed. Material that fails to do this cannot, ipso facto, belong to the realm of the national, regardless of how this is defined. Furthermore, the construction of national identities is an elite-mediated activity in which considerations of power and hegemony are implicated in the selection, valorisation and consecration of the canon of national literature which, as Corse writes, 'is a product of human choice and contestation, not a natural choice' (1997: 16).

Academics, publishers, critics and those in control of the various channels of communication partake in this process of canon formation which, by its very nature, is always in a state of becoming. Men and women of letters participate in this cultural-cum-political process as members of the elite or counter-elite in their own communities, but the nature of their participation is contingent on the historical contexts and the political trajectories in which they find themselves. In some cases, they play a role that is confirming of the nation as a political or cultural entity, its uniqueness and its right to a state of its own. This is the case with the early pronouncements of pan-Arab nationalism which, in recent times, has confined itself to expressions of cultural nationalism. In other cases, for example in East and West Germany before re/unification in 1990, literature played a multiplicity of national roles, one of which was discrediting the cause of unity of the two parts of Germany as members of a single *Kulturnation* that is deserving of a single nation-state of its own (Brockmann 1999: 10). In yet other cases, literature can be used to deconstruct, or even subvert, a national project in favour of an alternative, typically irredentist, view of a putative 'nation' and its destiny. Literary expressions of state-nationalism in the Arabic-speaking world, for example Egyptian and Lebanese nationalism, have played this role vis-à-vis pan-Arab nationalism. This explains the references to Egyptian, Lebanese and Sudanese literatures as individualities in Arab cultural and political discourse, wherein the state takes on itself the task of promoting its own national identity through a set of unique symbols, motifs, anniversaries and cultural products, including having a literature that carries its name.

National identities are complex phenomena that relate to national literatures in complex and myriad ways. This book gives expression to this multifarious link of nation to literature through a variety of perspectives. As a starting point, it does not assume that this link is unidirectional; rather, the book is based on an assumption of reciprocity, whereby the nation shapes its literature and is shaped by it in a shuttling mode of interaction. The chapters of this book reflect this reciprocity by sometimes approaching their subject matter through the

literary lens, while at other times they do so through the nationalist perspective, but at no point do they decouple the two sides of the relationship from each other. Furthermore, one feature of this book is worth highlighting: we do not subscribe to the 'reflection' theory of literature in which, as cultural material, literature is said to 'reflect', 'mirror' or 'capture' the national character of a people. Reflection, which is popular in the media and dominates in the ethnic and cultural conceptualisations of the nation in modern Arab thought, smacks of naïve realism and of the reductive reliance on stereotypes. It additionally assumes that the nation predates its cultural expression in literature as the non-political site of the political. Furthermore, reflection assumes the existence of an inherent and pre-existing meaning in the text which captures essential features of the national culture; it additionally assumes that this meaning is accessible to the members of the nation who can recover it with a high degree of inter-subjective validity. Arabic writings on the connection between nation and literature tend to favour this outmoded perspective.

Popular in the Marxist tradition, reflection is a defective theory of the relationship between nation and literature as categories of the social world and cultural production respectively (see Albrecht 1954). Not only does reflection deny the multiplicity of meanings – some of it may be hugely discordant – that the readers of a text can derive from it, but it further denies their role as active creators of meaning who can interpret and reinterpret the text concerned in ways that defy its initial or canonical reception. Put differently, reflection subjugates and tethers the reader to the text in an unwarranted fashion. It views the text as a closed semantic unit whose meaning is to a very large extent determined in advance of reading and is invariant both synchronically and diachronically. Furthermore, as Noble points out, the proponents of this theory never adequately explain 'how the "optics" of reflection work' (1976: 213). As a result, 'reflection remains an image' and 'does not become a concept' (ibid.). As a metaphor, reflection invites further modifications (for an expansion of the model, see Griswold 1981), such as refraction and distortion, to make it more viable as an instrument of explanation, but these modifications compound the metaphor by further accretions that render reflection even more problematic. Finally, reflection is based on the false premise that the national and the literary are ontologically separable. The constructivist view of the nation, to which this work is a contribution, rejects this premise in favour of an understanding of culture and social reality in which literature and the nation co-exist symbio-tically. As Brockmann notes in his study of the role of literature in German re/unification, 'in the world of social constructions the boundary between the real and the fictional is not impermeable' (1999: 19).

Adopting a constructivist view of the nation implies a modernist under-standing of the relationship between it and literature, although this relationship

invariably invokes the symbols and motifs of pre-modernity insofar as these answer to the criterion of resonance mentioned above. Early pronouncements on nationalism in Western Europe in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century established the connection between nation and literature as a cornerstone of nation building. The German Romantics gave currency to this concept, although their ideas on the formation of national identities have a strong essentialist flavour. Giving literatures national names and treating them as discrete units were an expression of this mode of thinking in which the uniqueness of the nation and the 'exceptionalism' of its literature had to be proclaimed, affirmed and constantly cultivated. This trend gathered momentum in the twentieth century, wherein literatures came to be identified and studied in national units in a way that overrides the linguistic medium through which these literatures are expressed. This explains why, as literary categories, English, Scottish and Irish literatures, for example, are thought to have identities of their own, in spite of the fact that they are – albeit not universally in Scottish and Irish literature – expressed through varieties of the same language. The same applies to American and to Canadian literature in English in spite of their different histories and political trajectories (Corse 1995, 1997). It is therefore not surprising that the notion of 'literary devolution' (see Crawford 1992) had been utilised as the counterpoint of political devolution in the British Isles at least half a decade before the latter became a legal reality in Scotland in 1999. A minority of scholars deplore this effect of nationalism. Elie Kedouri condemns nationalism for disrupting 'whatever equilibrium had been reached between the different groups [in a community], [by] reopen[ing] settled questions and ... renewing strife' (1966: 115). Kedouri further condemns nationalism for being the invention of 'literary men who had never exercised power, and appreciated little the necessities and obligations incidental to intercourse between states' (ibid.: 70–1). This one-sided view of nationalism remains the exception not the rule. Commenting on the role of poetry in nation building, Aberbach writes (2003: 271):

> Nationalism, though exposed in its potential for destruction, remains a major political force in civilisation. National poetry is not marginal but expresses much of what ordinary people feel. It tends to be vindicated by history, if not in its call for violent upheaval or revenge, then in its hope for national renewal, both political and spiritual. Poetry continues as a midwife to nationalism, though rarely with the undiluted violence and idealism of the past.

Rather than being on the wane under the onslaught of globalisation and post-modernity, the nation is entrenching itself as a fact of our social and political worlds. This is particularly true of the Middle East, wherein national literatures act as markers of the nation regionally and in the international arena. Although the concept of the nation-state is culturally, politically and socio-

logically 'brittle' in the Arab Middle East, and although it has to compete with alternative pan- or, to a lesser extent, regional models of the nation, the development of a national literature – regardless of how this is understood – is treated as a sign of cultural independence. As Corse points out, 'national literatures have become identified within both the national and international communities as an essential characteristic of nation-states' (1997: 24). The functionality of literature as a 'central resource in the process of creating the necessary unity, loyalty and patriotism of national populations' (ibid.: 25) is therefore pivotal in national task-orientation and mobilisation. Literacy and the mass media are the linchpins in this process because they enable the members of the nation to create bonds of allegiance and identity with each other across synchronic space. Conceptualising the nation as an 'imagined community' therefore is partially dependent on literature, which can create an experience of 'unisonality' between members of the nation. In the Arab context, the school curriculum is the major incubator of this 'unisonality' which, more often than not, is expressed through poetry rather than prose literature. This variation in the relative national merits of poetry and prose literature in the Arab arena calls for a revision of Benedict Anderson's view of the novel as the prime carrier of nationalist meaning in the literary field (1991). In addition, this variation draws attention to the fact that literary form is as important as nationalist content in promoting the cause of the nation. Being associated with orality-cum-aurality through public performance in Arab culture, Arabic nationalist poetry enhances the experience of 'unisonality' which national literature aims to promote among the members of the nation. In this respect, poetry steals a march on the novel.

The link between nation and literature in the Arab Middle East assumes great importance because of the tug of war between the nation-state and pan-Arab nationalism. Each form of nationalism strives for authenticity and seeks to inscribe this in a literature that it calls its own. For pan-Arabists, state-nationalism is a centrifugal force of political and cultural fragmentation that is at odds with the centripetal pull of pan-Arabism. Because it lacks political expression in a nation-state, pan-Arabism emphasises culture as a paramount attribute of the nation. As Brockmann observes, 'culture is the primary way in which nations without political boundaries locate and identify themselves' (1999: 10). Muhammad Husayn Haykal* expresses a similar view in his advocacy of the role of literature in Egyptian territorial nationalism: 'Literature is the force which nothing else can vanquish or overcome as easily as an armed force can suppress political revolution' (Gershoni and Jankowski 1986: 88).

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* Full transliteration is not used in the body of the text unless deemed necessary. Names and other terms will, therefore, be given the the form nearest to their full transliteration.

As we shall see below, this is also true of 'refugee' nations, of whom the Palestinians are a prime example. For culture and refugee nations, national identity is most strongly located in what the German Romantics have called the 'republic of letters'. Thomas Mann captured this feature of the culture of divided nation when he declared during the Goethe celebrations of 1949: 'Who should guarantee the unity of Germany if not an independent writer, whose real home … is the free German language, untouched by zones of occupation' (quoted in Brockmann, ibid.: 9). Although Thomas Mann here refers to language, it cannot be lost on the reader that he does so from the position of an eminent man of letters. Günter Grass reiterated the same position in 1980 when he declared that the 'only thing in the two German states that can be proven to be pan-German is literature' (ibid.: 32). What Thomas Mann and Günter Grass have said about Germany is true of pan-Arabism which attributes the sense of difference promoted by the Arab nation-states to the strong similarities that exist between them. A similar tendency at differentiation existed in the deliberate process to fashion an American literature that is distinct from English literature. Joe Cleary raises this strategy of differentiation to the status of a general principle when he says that the anxiety 'to distinguish a national culture may be most acute precisely where the substantive cultural differences between national Self and significant Other are least obvious' (2002: 54). Cleary has in mind the Irish national literary experience vis-à-vis English literature, but his point has wider validity. The drive to establish nation-state cultures, including literatures, in the Arab world is surely motivated by the socio-political dynamics inherent in this principle.

The similarities between the Arab and German situations vis-à-vis the role of literature in nation building are such that they do deserve a comparative study of their own. In the German Democratic Republic, which lacked a public space for free expression in the national domain, literature emerged as a surrogate channel for the promulgation, promotion and exchange of views that would otherwise have been subject to brutal censorship. This is true of literature in the Arab nation-state which, that is the state, tends to be intolerant of alternative national ideologies and their expression in literature. Commenting on the German Democratic Republic, Brockmann states that 'where other avenues of discourse were blocked because of the Communist regime's repression of open political dialogue, literature assumed a privileged role in enabling a more oblique form of communication' (ibid.: 2). This is true of the situation in the Arab nation-state, as Hasan (2002) points out, where literature plays a counter-hegemonic role often in favour of pan-Arabism. It is also true of the Palestinians in Israel who, in pursuit of their national claims through cultural modes of expression, do resort to various forms of self-censorship and 'oblique means of communication'. As in the German Democratic Republic, allegory is used in

Arabic and Palestinian literature as a preferred mode of articulating this obliqueness. Examples of this will be found in this work.

Before re/unification Germany exemplified the position of literature in a situation of national partition. As we have pointed out above, the situation of Germany shares some important features with the position of the Palestinians as members of a refugee nation, in spite of the major objective differences that exist between the German and Palestinian cases. Living in the diaspora in a state of exile, the Palestinians too have relied on literature to fashion a national identity that can override their geographical dispersal and political fragmentation. Creating a public sphere in which being Palestinian can be given expression, literature has been instrumental in fostering a sense of national identity among Palestinians. In his illuminating study of literature, partition and the nation-state, Joe Cleary offers the following astute comment on the link between nation and literature in the Palestinian case (2002: 86):

> In the absence of an available nation-state, the development of a national literature has enabled the Palestinians to reinforce their sense of themselves as a distinct people and to express solidarity across the disjunctive locales of Palestinian existence in the face of repeated political reversals and calamities. Literature, that is, is one of the ways in which the scattered sectors of the Palestinian people can be imaginatively connected in the here and now even if actual statehood remains constantly deferred.

As a dispossessed and 'de-territorialised' community, the Palestinians embody the exilic experience of what Ibrahim Muhawi in this volume calls the 'present-absent' or the 'absent-present'. Edward Said captures this experience in the title of his autobiography *Out of Place*. As a nation in exile, or a refugee nation, the Palestinians, even when they live on their historical land, are 'out of place' as a political entity and as a community in which its present is so tragically out of kilter with its past. Nadia Yaqub gives an illuminating discussion of how this ruptured relationship between the 'absent' and the 'present' is reconstructed and enacted in the public performance of the oral Palestinian poetry duel in the Galilee in northern Israel. The context for this poetry, and its 'unisonality' in public performance, is the wedding eve party, the *sahrah*, in which Palestinians from different localities in Israel meet and interact in mock verbal duels that, on the surface, seem to be tied to the exigencies of the 'here' and 'now'. Invoking the events, characters and place names of a heroic past, the oral poetry duel contrasts this past with the un-heroic present of the Palestinians in Israel whose lives are characterised by political, economic and cultural subordination to a hegemonic Hebrew-Zionist culture and political ideology.

As an exercise in 'phatic communion', much of this poetry performs a restorative and therapeutic role in national terms, allowing the Palestinians in Israel to construct a positive vision of the national self and to cope with the trauma of their dispossession, de-territorialisation and dispersal. Nadia Yaqub

expresses this with great precision when she writes that 'Palestinian poetry is commemorative of an anterior time invested with a "Truth" that is absent from the present' (p. 24). As performance, the oral Palestinian poetry duel extols the heroic qualities of the audience and invites them into a zone of signification in which 'military imagery and epithets … run through the evening entertainment' (p. 23). More importantly, however, this zone of signification is articulated through a Palestinian dialect that is free from Hebrew borrowings, although these borrowings do exist in ordinary Palestinian speech in Israel. The absence of these borrowings is all the more significant because Palestinian oral poetry occasionally embodies some English words, and similar borrowings are found in the neighbouring oral poetry of Lebanon. The absence of Hebrew words cannot therefore be read as the application of a general rule which disallows the use of foreign words in the oral poetry duel.

Naming places and localities is a primary feature of the national semantics of the oral Palestinian poetry duel. The act of piling name upon name in this poetry may, from a critical point of view, be viewed as an exercise in listing; this is far from being the case. Naming helps tie the audience to locality and aims at asserting its claims of ownership over it. The fact that the names of the towns and villages in the poetry are paraded in Arabic constitutes a rejection of Hebrew semantic and cartographic hegemony, of the attempt to lay claim to the land by attaching alternative names to it (see Suleiman 2004).

Dealing with the absent-present relationship as a case of hyphenated identity in the Palestinian national experience, Ibrahim Muhawi correlates identity with the structure of irony, which is a feature of some of the recent and most seminal writings by Palestinians. To effect this correlation, Ibrahim Muhawi moves away 'from a purely semantic notion of … opposite meaning [in irony] to that of an absent meaning' (p. 32). Understood in this way, irony becomes 'metonymic' of all situations of exile, of which the Palestinian national experience is a paradigm example in modern times in that it manifests the following conditions: 'being literally out of place, needing to be elsewhere and not having that "elsewhere" where one would rather be' (p. 198). But irony in the Palestinian context performs a lot more than just acting as a trope for the Palestinian national experience. It allows the writer to establish a communion with his readers by pretending that he is 'revealing secrets that only they will understand' (p. 37). In addition, this communion, as an act in construction, allows the writer to be critical of the national self without causing psychological injury or national offence. By appearing to take the readers into his confidence, the writer can surreptitiously blur the difference between the two poles of the textual relationship, especially when irony is laced with fantasy or elements of stereotypical humour that can engross the reader in the machinations of the writer. In Palestinian literature, irony creates a 'community of sympathy' in such