

THE POSTCOLONIAL MOROCCAN NOVEL: BETWEEN EXPERIMENTALISM AND REALISM

Dr. Anouar El Younssi

Department of Modern Languages & Cultures
Virginia Military Institute
Lexington, VA, USA

Abstract

This paper researches the literary phenomenon of *al-tajrīb* (Arabic for “experimentalism”) in the Moroccan novel during the decades following national independence in 1956. *Al-tajrīb* (experimentalism) emerged as an alternative mode to the realist model of Egyptian Nobel laureate Najīb Maḥfūz (Naguib Mahfouz) (b. 1911-d. 2006), a model which influenced a number of novelists in Morocco. By contrasting experimental novels by Moroccan littérateurs to the realist model of the classical European novel and the classical Arabic novel, I do not imply that Moroccan (and Arab) novelistic experimentalism is un-realistic or treat the unreal. At stake in my paper is the new definition of “realism” that emerges through the practices and discourses of experimental fiction. Rather than proposing “realism” as a mimetic literary mode based on descriptive prose, what we see instead is a politics of form and a formalization of politics that work through the fusion of multiple narrative voices and layers, a reliance on the technique of fragmentation, the inclusion of a metafictional discourse that interrupts the narrative in order to reflect on the morphology and goal of literary writing, and so forth. As Moroccan novelist-critic Aḥmad al-Madīnī points out, experimental formal features such as the “breaking and interpenetration of [narrative] times [and] the multiplicity of voices” constitute “legitimate attributes to a novelistic world [. . .] with a tragic vision” (Qtd. in Abū Ḥamāla 54). In a similar vein, Muḥammad Barrādah, another prominent novelist-critic, notes that the “experimental takeoff” in Moroccan and Arab novelistic writing could be read as “a period of venting and settling of accounts with a handicapped heritage and an inert history” (*al-Riwāyah al-‘Arabiyyah*, 37-38). Both al-Madīnī and Barrādah highlight the ideological implications of the shift in literary representation brought about by Arab experimentalism. In this paper, I argue that formal experimentalism in Moroccan and Arab literatures retains its tie to reality through *political exigency*. It is derived from a political need to break with continuous history, which turns experimentalism into a discursive site that probes the question of how we do things differently.

It follows that reality, in its cultural and socio-political ramifications, undergirds Moroccan (and Arab) literary experimentalism. Along with novelist-critic Muḥammad Amanašūr, I maintain that “realism is not in contradiction with experimentalism” (*Istrāṭijiyāt*, 168). The notion of realism in this context is not figural representation of plausible worldly coordinates, but the formal, structural, and linguistic invocation of new subject positions that correspond (implicitly and/or discursively) to immediate contemporary political exigency. Al-Madīnī remarks that formal experimentalism has sought to establish “an extra-realistic relationship” with the social, which positions the individual—not his or her environment—in the center (*Ru‘yat*, 157). This new subject position or positioning is indicative of formal experimentalism’s endeavors to create new discursive spheres for the treatment of the social and the political, and in so doing Moroccan (and Arab) experimental writings become—or make the claim of being—realistic. With the politics of formal experimentalism in mind, this paper makes the claim that experimental writings in Morocco (and by extension the Arab world) are deeply ingrained in social reality—albeit in their own way—and, therefore, should not be seen as invested in formal experimentation for its own sake. That is, experimentalism has a point of reference in the political and socio-cultural arenas, and should be treated accordingly.