

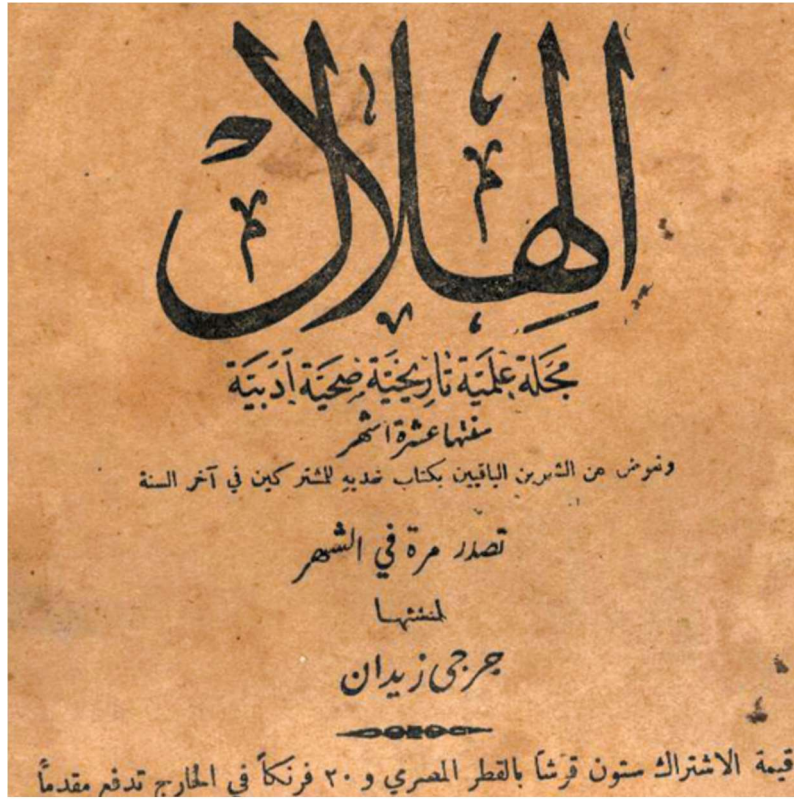
**FICTION AND HISTORY: THE REBIRTH  
OF THE HISTORICAL NOVEL IN ARABIC**

**Proceedings of the 13th EURAMAL Conference,  
28 May - 1 June, 2018 (Naples/Italy)**



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## INTRODUCTION

Sobhi Boustani  
 Rasheed El-Enany  
 Monica Ruocco  
 Patrizia Zanelli

*Fiction and History: the Rebirth of the Historical Novel in Arabic* was the general theme of the 13th EURAMAL (European Association for Modern Arabic Literature) Conference, held from 28 May to 1 June 2018 at Università di Napoli “L’Orientale” (L’Orientale University of Naples). This volume includes the edited versions of some of the papers presented during the various panel discussions organised for the event. This volume represents a continuation of the series of published proceedings of the previous twelve EURAMAL conferences (<http://www.euramal.eu/conferences/home.html>).

Arabic historical fiction has experienced, over the last few decades, a remarkable revival at the hands of increasing numbers of both emerging and established authors. This increased production has, however, not yet been specifically approached as a renascent genre. The goal of 13th EURAMAL conference was to re-open the debate on the relationship between literary and historiographic writing, and to study the complex relationship between the two forms of writing, by exploring the porous borders that dimly separate them. Although the question is not new, it certainly deserved renewed attention, given the noticeable rise of the genre in recent years. The proliferation of the texts and the prominence of their authors confirmed the importance of this new literary trend. In particular, the 13th EURAMAL conference sought to bring into focus the historical novel written in the last few decades, and particularly since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and to reconsider the permeability between literature and history in a diachronic perspective.

The suggested topics for the conference included: “Rethinking theory of historical fiction”, “Re-imagining the past”, “Genre fusion”, “Alternative histories”, “Re-writing the history of Arabic fiction”. The papers presented at the conference explored the shift of critical paradigms from the notions of “historical novel” or “realism” to those of “testimonial fiction” or “historical allegory”, with a particular interest in the process used by

authors to fit history into fiction and the concepts of history cultivated by those who produce literature. Some papers considered the fusion of different literary genres, while some analysed novels proposing an alternative to dominant nation-state narratives; others still turned their attention to novels that seek to reinstate minorities previously cut out of official narratives.

During the 13th EURAMAL conference in Naples, Isabella Camera d'Afflitto, Professor Emeritus at La Sapienza University of Rome, gave the Edward de Moor Memorial Lecture. The lecture, entitled "Ġurġi Zaydān's *Šaġarat al-Durr* between fiction and history. Women's emancipation or a revival of traditional stereotypes?" focused on the figure of the pioneer of the modern historical fiction in Arabic. Professor d'Afflitto put under new light some of Zaydān's controversial opinions on the role of the Arab woman in society during the *nahḍah*, when a strong debate on women's emancipation was taking place, especially in Egypt.

Other contributions deal with the pioneers of the historical novel. Magdalena Kubarek, in her paper "How the present shapes the past", makes a comparison between Ġurġi Zaydān's project of writing historical novels with Naġīb al-Kaylānī's idea of applying literature as a kind of *da'wah*, or religious proselytizing that made him the father of the Islamic novel. In his paper, Rasheed El-Enany reviews the use of history in the fiction of Naġīb Maḥfūz throughout the stages of his career, focusing on the relationship between his use of history and contemporary reality.

If fictional texts borrow their material from history and turn certain historical events, or indeed whole epochs, into the very subject of their narratives, the following questions inevitably arise. How does history fit into fiction? Which tools are used? What kind of processes are involved? Which concepts of history are being cultivated by those who produce literature? How is the past perceived? How does fiction represent the intersection between history and popular culture? Some of the contributions try to answer these questions. The novel *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ ḥaḍīh al-madīnah* [No knives in the kitchens of this city] by Ḥālid Ḥalīfah is the object of Andréa Forget's contribution "L'histoire syrienne revisitée". Her paper demonstrates that narrative subjectivity can make history more tangible and provide keys to better understand the current Syrian situation through the recounts of the painful ordeals experienced by a Syrian family from the 1960s to the present day. Dani Nassif's paper "The Invisible History of the Lebanese Civil War" explores the invisible history of an

invisible generation disappeared during the Lebanese civil war as depicted in Rabī Ğābir's 2008 novel *al-I'tirāfāt* [Confessions], and the difficulties that the disappeared might face while trying to retrieve their identity in post-war Lebanon. The main purpose of Baian Rayhanova's paper is to examine the role of the historical discourse in the fictions by Fāris Zarzūr (1929-2003) who begins his creative career in the late fifties and becomes one of the most influential writers in Syria, focusing on the interconnections between fictional elements and documentary material. While the intention of Paola Viviani's essay is to analyse the historical fiction of 'Abd al-'Azīz Āl Maḥmūd, in particular his novel *al-Qurṣān* (2011) in which the author sheds light on relevant events in modern Qatari history.

The Arab history viewed in a Mediterranean multicultural perspective is the subject of Francesca Corrao's paper, in which she examines how Modern Arab Poetry has used history and myths to read colonialism, independence and migration.

Several papers examine how Arab novelists reread the past as a gateway to understanding the present. Laurence Denooz, in her contribution "Relire le passé pour une analyse objective/subjective du présent?" about Sun' Allāh Ibrāhīm's 2008 novel *al-'Amāmah wa-l-qubba'ah* [The Turban and the Hat] demonstrates that in this novel the author points to a possible analogy between the various reactions of the Egyptians to Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt and Arab reactions to various Western interventions in the Middle East of the 21st century. Nazek Fahmy deals with two Egyptian novels, both published in 2015, *Kilāb al-Rā'ī* [The Shepherd's Dogs] by Ašraf al-'Ašmāwī, and *al-Azbakiyyah* by Nāṣir 'Irāq (Nasser Iraq) which revisit the French campaign in Egypt and Syria (1898-1901): both novels are a mix of fact and fiction, a medley of historical authentication and literary manipulation and raise questions about politics and religion. Alessandro Buontempo, in his article "Aḥmad Murād's *Arḍ al-Ilāh*: Will Clichés Set History's Record Straight?" explores the ways in which the fictionalization of the act of recovery of the past serves the aim of restoring historical knowledge by looking at how the clichés and themes of the historical crime fiction are developed.

Hartmut Fähndrich's contribution "Making a Political Point or Writing a Historical Story?" analyses the first of the collection of stories published in *Marāṭī al-ayyām* (Elegies on the Glorious Days, 2001) by Syrian author Ḥaydar Ḥaydar who, juxtaposing extracts from the chronicles of al-Ṭabarī

and others to descriptions of recent events, aims to connect past and present in the Arab world in order to show or, rather, claim that Arabic history has not progressed or improved through the centuries.

In her contribution “Re-writing the Past Through a Novel”, Jolanda Guardi links one of Algerian writer Wasīnī al-A‘raġ’s early novels, *Hārisat al-zilāl. Dūn Kīšūt fi l-Ġazā’ir* (The female guardian of the shadows. Don Quijote in Algiers, 1996), to his more recent, *al-Bayt al-andalusī (Mémoires)* (The Andalusian house, 2010), to highlight how the author perceives the Andalusian legacy in Algeria and elaborates it in order to analyse present political and social issues.

One may also ask to what extent historical questions/issues can be clarified by fiction. Is a novel better suited to convey historical truth than a historiographical account? Alternative histories are at the centre of some of the contributions included in this volume.

Katia Ghosn, in her “Le roman historique est-il une histoire contemporaine?” focuses on the novels by Lebanese author Ilyās Ḥūrī that go beyond simply deconstructing history as material and carry out metafictional research on the modalities of historical fiction writing nowadays: here contemporary historiography is juxtaposed with fiction writing.

Maria Avino presents a study of *Riḥlāt al-Ṭuršaġī al-Ḥallūġī* (Journeys of the Pickle and Dessert Maker, 1991) by Egyptian novelist Ḥayrī Šalabī, in which the author expresses the horror of the History, which he considers to be a hostile and inhumane force that invades and destroys ordinary people’s lives, and he looks for another “history”, that of the defeated.

In her “A Poetical Counter-Narrative of post-invasion Iraq: Preliminary Considerations on the War in Women Poets’ Verses, between History and Myth” Mariangela Masullo explores a poetical counter-narrative of Iraq through the voices of women poets who share a vision and a passionate description of the historical moment of national hardship.

In his article on “Traditions of Martyrdom and Trauma”, Stephan Milich discuss how Palestinian writer ‘Āṭif Abū Sayf’s novel *Ḥayāh mu‘allaqah* (Suspended Life, 2014) deals with the violent past and present of the author’s society by opening a controversial debate about the politics of mourning through a complex contrapuntal structure of narration.

The new trends in historical fiction writing across the Arab world are well illustrated in many of the papers offered in this volume.

Tetz Rooke’s study “The Forefathers and the Descendants”, analyses two historical novels by Libyan writer Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī about the rise of

the Qaramānī dynasty in Libya in the eighteenth century. In these novels, the author fuses the mystic with the realistic and his narrative transcends the traditional boundaries of the historical novel as a genre. 'History' becomes allegoric, a mirror of human existence according to al-Kūnī, thus probing the eternal.

The research paper presented by Dorit Gottesfeld concerns a very recent attempt to re-create a historical novel. Focusing on Jordanian writer Sāmiya al-ʿAṭʿūṭ's *al-Maydān rāyih ǧāyy* (Coming and Going to the Square, 2013), Gottesfeld shows how the changes that took place in the Arab world between 2011 and 2013 also transformed the perception of history.

Patrizia Zanelli's contribution, "The Pharaonic Past in a Post-2011 Egyptian Novel for Children", focuses on Ibrāhīm Farǧalī's *Muǧāmarah fī Madīnat al-Mawṭā* (Adventure in the City of the Dead, 2014). The study explains how the author uses time-slippage to send his child protagonists from the digital era to ancient Egypt, to encourage his young readers to learn about history; by doing so, he tries to contrast not only Islamism but also all centuries-old regressive traditions persisting in his country. A most unusual kind of historical fiction is presented by Jonathan Morén in his "Zenobia Transformed: History as a Footnote to Imagination", in which he examines the original approach to the concept of authenticity in Salīm Barakāt's novel about the queen of Palmyra, *Zaʿīr al-ẓilāl fī ḥadāʾiq Zanūbiyā* (The Roaring of Shadows in Zenobia's Gardens, 2017).

Rewriting History in the Egyptian drama is the subject of Daniela Potenza's contribution about Laila Soliman's play, *Zig Zig* (2016), which retells the story of twelve Egyptian women raped by British soldiers in 1919 and who reported their testimony in a British military court. The allusion to recent Egyptian history is clear: after the revolution, a citizen must have the right to interpret her/his past and to denounce it.

