

BOOK REVIEW

Samira Aghacy, *Ageing in the Modern Arabic Novel*, Edinburgh University Press, 2020; pp. 186.

Samira Aghacy's *Ageing in the Modern Arabic Novel* (2020; paperback 2022) offers an original study of the representations of old age and ageing in modern Arab novels. The author opens her book with an introductory chapter in which she points out the scarcity of research devoted to old age in the Arabo-Islamic world in general, and particularly to ageing as represented in works of fiction. In addition to explaining the theoretical framework and methodological approach, the Introduction offers an informed definition of ageing, taking into consideration the biological, mental, and social dimensions of the process. It then situates the study within a socio-cultural context, while at the same time exposing the limitations of the "essentialist model" which tends to consider ageing "biologically determined" and "views older individuals as an undifferentiated, homogenous group, with identical needs and interests" (2). The study, instead, problematises ageing and its literary representations, adopting the notion of "Janus-faced old age", combining both decline and well-being (4); while addressing it in terms of the personal perceptions of the ageing body set in contrast to the social identity of old age, affected by culture, religion, tradition, family, and gender. The analysis covers fifteen texts (published in Arabic, some of which have been translated into English) written across three decades, and hence represents the socio-cultural manifestations and transformations that have affected a diversified Arab ageing population.

The book is divided into five chapters in addition to an introduction and conclusion. The "Introduction" identifies the book as "a first critical attempt to look at fictional works written by Arab male and female writers through the lens of ageing. It centres on ageing as it is understood, practiced and problematised in the modern Arabic novel" (15). Aghacy admits that

her focus on the representations of the elderly in Arabic literature is motivated by her interest primarily in the narrative rather than political discourse; hence her attention to “the use of digressive and fragmented narratives that correlate past and present and disrupt the linear pattern” (15) through the techniques of flash-back and flash-forward, often leading to open ended narrative structures. The texts themselves represent a variety of narratives, ranging between the fictional and autobiographical, across age and gender, whereby the authors themselves include women and men, young and old, whose narratives are centred around elderly characters and ageing experiences. The author concludes her Introduction with a description of the chapters, highlighting the shifts in the notion of ageing, and exposing the social stereotypes of ageing through the diversified representations of the elderly in modern Arabic literature from Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Tunisia.

Chapter One, “Ageing in Traditional Neighbourhoods: Conformity and Transgression”, discusses ageing within traditional familial and local settings, with particular attention to ageing women. The author focuses her analysis on three novels by Iraqi authors, translated into English: Fuad al-Takarli’s *The Long Way Back* (2001; 1980), Alia Mamdouh’s *Mothballs* (1986), and Inaam Kachachi’s *The American Granddaughter* (2010; 2008). The chapter is divided into sections addressing various aspects of ageing women and the representation of Arab grandmothers. In the three novels, women are located within the family, and mostly occupying marginal positions in the traditional patriarchal structure. Minor differences can be identified; in al-Takarli’s novel, all the women are kept under the authority of the (ageing) male patriarch, while in Mamdouh’s text the family undergoes a transition as the grandmother takes over authority following the grandfather’s death. Kachachi’s novel adds another dimension in the conflict arising between the traditional religious grandmother living in Mosul, and her recently arriving granddaughter, in Iraq, who was raised in the USA. The analysis of the selected novels in this chapter leads to the main argument about elderly women’s agency withing the restrictions imposed by the traditional Iraqi/Arab society. Yet, despite being mostly

portrayed within the family and the community, where they maintain the values of socio-cultural conformity, these ageing women show “gestures of resistance” and minor “transgressive actions” (44).

Chapter Two, entitled “Hoary Monuments, Residual Bodies: Senescence in the City”, deals with novels set in the city, where the author traces the representation of the old people as they witness the demographic and urban changes in their cities: Cairo and Aleppo. The chapter focuses on two Egyptian novels translated into English, Naguib Mahfouz’s *Sugar Street* (1993; 1957) and Alaa al-Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building* (2004; 2002), as well as the Syrian writer’s Khalid Khalifa’s *No Knives in This City’s Kitchen* (2016; 2013). Aghacy pays attention in this chapter to the ageing Hajj Abd al-Jawad and the likewise ageing prostitute Sultana Zubayda in Mahfouz’s novel. Unlike these two characters who mostly lament their bygone prime against the backdrop of a changing city, al-Aswany’s ageing Zaki walks the streets of Cairo, simply noting its urban transformation. In Khalifa’s novel, a group of ageing men and women witness the transformation that happens to their city since WWI and into the 21st century (before 2011), where they keep comparing the old to the new; while the paradoxical presence of the dead mother recounted by her son, who remembers her failure to accept the changes around her leads her to “a world of dreams and fantasy away from the material reality outside” (49). It is through the powerful metaphor of “crumbling bricks and bodies” that Aghacy portrays the parallelism in the ageing of people and cities, while it is al-Aswany’s Zaki, who represents the alderly “who succeed in reconciling the old and the new and embrace a hybrid identity” (71).

Chapter Three addresses “Menopausal Tremors: Refurbishing the Body”, looking at the representations of urban middle-class middle-aged women (mostly around the age of fifty) at the threshold of ageing. The examined texts (not translated into English) include the following: Lebanese writers’ René al-Hayek’s *Shita’ Mahjour* (‘An Abandoned Winter’, 1994) and Lina Kreidiyyeh’s *Khan Zada* (2010), Palestinian writer’s Sahar Khalifah’s novel *The Inheritance* (2005; 1997), Syrian writer’s Haifa Badr’s *Imra’a fi al-Khamsin* (‘A Woman of Fifty’, 2015). The chapter

explores the experiences of the women protagonists through tracing their awareness of their ageing bodies and changing appearances. The women see their physical transformations in the 'mirrors', and exercise much effort towards slowing down when they perceive (through the society's eyes) a bodily decline. Hence the female body becomes the site of a "project" of "body maintenance" (87) not only motivated by an innate self-image, but rather spurred on by social expectations of femininity and sexual desirability by maintaining a normative youthful figure. Aghacy insightfully points out that although these women resist the natural process of ageing, their concerns and efforts in fact reflect and reinforce the socio-cultural patriarchal attitudes towards menopause and constructions of middle-aged womanhood. These women end up resisting the manifestations of ageing instead of confronting the stereotypes of femininity and the stigma of menopause and physical ageing.

Unlike the previous chapters, which focus on the experiences of women, Chapter Four, entitled "Senile Masculinity: The Male Body in Crisis", centres around ageing men and their struggle to preserve their bodies in youthful shape. The three texts are also all written by men, and include the following: Tunisian writer al-Habib al-Salimy's *Ushshaq Bayya* ('The Lovers of Bayya', 2002), as well as the Lebanese Hasan Daoud's *Borrowed Time* (2008; 1990), and Rashid al-Daif's novel *O.K. ma' al-Salama* ('O.K. Goodbye', 2008). Al-Salimy's novel is about four working-class old men in their seventies painfully conscious of their deteriorating physical and sexual attributes; Aghacy examines their attempts to preserve their vitality and power in terms of "Survival Games" (105) against their physical ailments and lost sexual attraction. Daoud's portrayal of ageing men is not based on a directly personal experience, but is modelled on the author's grandfather. Similar to the characters in al-Salimy's novel, the protagonist here is in a retired man in his eighties who moves to his home village where having lost his authority, health, and vigour, the society's "oppressive insistence on the resolute fixity of chronological age robs him of his masculinity and selfhood" (113). In al-Daif's text masculinity is linked to sexual potency, where the protagonist fears the decline in his sexual as well

as cognitive powers. Being in his sixties, he realises “what it means to be outside the norm of youthful sexuality” and his condition deteriorates as “he has internalised socio-cultural values about physical ageing and decline” (125). Aghacy points out the implied tragedies of these men as they witness their masculinity in decline, while at the same time unsettling the “dominant stereotypes of ageing and reveal multiple masculinities in accordance with positionality, social setting, class, gender and economic factors” (129).

In the last chapter, Chapter Five “Yarns of Later Life: Transgressive Strategies”, Samira Aghacy turns to ageing men and women in ‘in what she describes as ‘semi-autobiographical novels’ where author and protagonist seem to merge and recount “their ageing experiences as well as their personal lives, subverting traditional autobiography” (133). These include the following: The Palestinian/Lebanese writer Nazik Yared’s *Improvisations on a Missing String* (1997; 1992), Palestinian writer Randa Khalidy’s *Sira Ghayr Butuliyya* (‘An Unheroic Autobiography’, 2016), and Lebanese writer Abbas Baydun’s *Album al-Khasara* (‘The Album of Defeat’, 2012). Yared’s protagonist is an ageing woman remembering the past and reflecting on the present while suffering from cancer. The novel moves not only in time but in place as well, between Palestine, Lebanon, and Cairo. Although at the end her treatment is completed and she can go back to her ordinary life, she remains haunted by her tormented self as “she sees a future of ageing, sickness and aloneness” (143). In Khalidy’s pseudo-autobiography, the protagonist embarks on recounting her life in autobiographical guise – though unlike traditional autobiographies of achievement, hers is an ‘unheroic’ one, as suggested in the title of the novel itself. Having reached the age of eighty, she does not fit within the stereotypical models of ageing women, but is apprehensive of the encroachment of decline, so while “she embraces an active late life, she remains conscious of imminent possibilities of frailty, illness, forgetfulness, disability, dependency” (143), as manifested in her “digressions and memory lapses” (144). Abbas Baydun’s protagonist-narrator, however, is a man in his sixties named Abbas Baydun, although

the text itself is described (on the book cover-page) as a novel. He is seen living on his own like many elderly people in Beirut whose children have left the country. The narrative traces his concern “monitoring his ageing body” (156), which involves the degeneration in his mobility, memory, and sexuality. The three texts share being written from the point of view of an ageing person, living alone, and are marked by self-reflexivity as well as referentiality to real place as well as to historical figures and events. Aghacy points out that the three protagonists share their efforts “to challenge erasure, re-evaluate their lives, make new decisions, concentrate on their present quotidian life” (161), and to exercise the power of self-representation via autobiographical narration.

In her brief Conclusion, Aghacy points out the limitations in Arab critical attention to ageing in literature, which has forced the study to rely on Western critical frameworks. At the same time, the analysis covers a range of different countries, and highlights the socio-cultural forms and effects of ageing on both men and women, especially in the contexts of wars and political upheavals. Gender and class as well play significant differentiating roles in the experiences of ageing in the Arab world, not only within one country, but even across various Arab countries, and consequently in relation to other parts of the world. However, it is a difference in the details, as ageing is a universal experience with its concomitant shared dimensions among humanity, finding expression in literary texts. Aghacy herself states one of the most visible results of the research which can be found in the way it shows through an examination of fifteen novels that “individuals are affected by ageing in diverse ways, revealing that there is no prototype of old age, and that the ageing process, like any other stage of life, is multi-layered, indeterminate, and shaped simultaneously by social, economic and political factors” (167), reflective of the socio-cultural and politico-historical specificity as well as diversity.

It is worth noting, however, that the book focuses on the novel as a literary genre, without addressing the genre itself in terms of Autobiography Theory and Life-Writing, especially in Chapter Five, where the description of the selected novels as semi-autobiographies is not

accounted for, nor is the identification of the novels as untraditional autobiographies substantiated, thus confusing the autobiographical as genre and technique. The selected texts all fall under fiction, and their 'semi-autobiographical' aspects could have been better analysed in terms of narrative technique, and problematising the issue of genre when all the selected (autobiographical) texts are actually published with the subtitle *Riwaya* (novel). Further development of self-reflexivity together with referentiality could have perhaps added to the autobiographical dimension of the selected texts. The title of the book itself situates the study within the over-arching notion of 'the modern Arabic novel', which matches its content in generic terms. Yet, despite the wide range of novels analysed throughout the chapters of the book, there seems to be more attention paid to texts from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon Palestine, and Egypt, compared to other Arab countries in the MENA region. The title, therefore sounds more inclusive than the content, which looks at modern Arabic fiction rather than 'the Modern Arabic Novel'.

The author's focus on women's narratives can be explained by the fact that the author, Samira Aghacy is Professor of English and Comparative Literature and interim Director of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University. However, in line with her earlier interest in a gender, rather than a feminist, approach, the book includes texts by men and women, as well as an analysis of representations of ageing femininity and masculinity. The study does not claim to subscribe to feminism, yet the research itself can be seen as a contribution to Arab feminist literary criticism, using gender, culture, and class as analytical tools. In that sense, Aghacy's contribution is interdisciplinary, as the book occupies a position at the intersection of the humanities and social sciences, with connections to geriatrics. It expands beyond Arabic literary studies, touching upon socio-cultural concerns, politico-historical reflections, as well as gender studies. Although it does not claim to provide a comparative study of the fifteen novels, the comparative dimension cannot be missed in a carefully reading of the book. The threads could have been brought together more elaborately in the concluding chapter of the book.

The book's forte, I believe, lies in its attempt and success to counter ageism in literary studies, and move elderly men and women from the margins of literary representation to the centre of critical attention. In this sense, Samira Aghacy's *Ageing in the Modern Arabic Novel* offers an original piece of serious research, providing a research model, and inviting an extension of this scholarship across generic boundaries, and into a wider spectrum of the MENA region, in literary studies and beyond.

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