


Ultimately, *Reorienting Modernism in Arabic and Persian Poetry* makes a significant contribution to the field of Middle Eastern literary studies. Thompson's interdisciplinary approach, which combines literary analysis, political history, and cultural theory, offers a nuanced understanding of modernist poetry's development in the Arabic and Persian traditions. His work aligns with ongoing efforts to decolonize comparative literature and expand the scope of global modernism beyond its traditional Eurocentric boundaries.

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Ways of Seeking: The Arabic Novel and the Poetics of Investigation

Emily Drumsta (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2024).
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In July 1997, a conference held in Beirut to honor Edward Said gathered a constellation of star public intellectuals from throughout the world. During a Q&A with Tariq Ali, someone took the floor to ask, "Why all the warmed-over Marxism?" Just like that. The ensuing hush in the now-defunct Beirut Theater lasted but an instant before Ali excoriated the privileged, white "thirty-something." Then, after a couple of jibes from Ali supporters, an already frail Eqbal Ahmad took the microphone and addressed the question seriously, giving a firm but gentle defense of Marxist method as the best available way of thinking about social justice within a materialist frame of reference.

Emily Drumsta's *Ways of Seeking* is evocative of this moment in two ways. Her analysis of Marxist critique as deployed in novels by Sonallah Ibrahim strikes one as exemplary of Ahmad's best available way of thinking about social justice. Second, her analyses of eight other Arab authors' novels of the 20th century goes further, making the historical materialist approach indeed look "warmed over" as she seeks to "construct an alternative, anticolonial history of knowledge in the modern Arab world" (p. 10). In the process, she rejects a container-contained model of knowledge and develops a seeker-seeking construct.

The book's thematic ambitiousness is balanced by its methodological humility. This jargon-free work of comparative literature deftly deploys aspects of numerous thinkers' work without fanfare: Bakhtin, Horkheimer and Adorno, Foucault, Judith Butler, Timothy Mitchell, and Samera Esmeir. It demonstrates a subtle grasp of French, and its command of idioms and regional usages in Arabic clarifies otherwise cryptic passages in the novels. Its close readings trace relevant etymologies, identifying rhetorical techniques, and wielding narratological tools, all in an effort to unpack ironies and reveal striking comparisons as the author "trawls for the remains of nonhegemonic forms of knowledge scattered within Arabic novels" (p. 10). The priority placed on literary method also allows Drumsta to rock the boat of 20th-century Arabic literary history. By choosing novels from different periods with similar literary structures and "continuity of purpose," she makes the largely successful argument that critics tend to overemphasize the role of political dates such as 1948 and 1967 in triggering aesthetic rupture.



The title, *Ways of Seeking*, evokes John Berger's 1972 *Ways of Seeing*, and the comparison is apt. Berger's television series and book taught us to see epistemological and political stakes beyond representational styles; Drumsta's book teaches us to see alternative ways of knowing beyond the colonial panoptic practices most famously analyzed by Timothy Mitchell in his 1991 book, *Colonising Egypt*. By focusing on detective fictions or novels that thematize the *majhūl*, or unknown, *Ways of Seeking* uses "fictional investigations to bracket and provincialize state-sanctioned, colonial, and academic truth-seeking practices" so that we can see the "persistence of the metaphysical in the midst of the scientific" (pp. 4, 10).

Taking seriously Drumsta's thesis of alternative epistemologies in Arabic fiction, the last chapter in this book, on Sonallah Ibrahim's 1981 novella, *The Committee* (al-Lajna), and 1992 novel, *Zaat*, should logically come first. Drumsta argues in this chapter that these fictions are essentially limit-cases of "historical-materialist investigation," defined as "an approach to history that prioritizes the relations of production, which are necessarily social, as the ultimate (but not the only) determining factor of historical change" (p. 191). She sees the narrator in *The Committee* as "driven by a Marxist concern with totality, on the one hand, and futurity, on the other," tracing his confrontations with Egypt's neoliberal system (p. 139). In each encounter he is proven correct and morally triumphant over his opponents, yet he endures "epic failure" (p. 139). Likewise, in *Zaat*, there is no vindication of justice, only a gimlet-eyed marginal character, Umm Wahid, whose "dialectics were not learned from Hegel" and who "knows intuitively that the premise of justice under capitalism is an illusion, and that simply exposing this truth will do nothing to change it" (p. 154). In sum, it is not that the historical-materialist method is intellectually insufficient, only that power is stronger. Drumsta demonstrates that she can walk the materialist walk, yet rather than take the common step of advocating "resistance" she in effect explores what difference considering the metaphysical would make.

According to the same logic that would place the chapter on Sonallah Ibrahim first in this book, the chapter on Elias Khoury's 1981 novel *White Masks* (al-Wujuh al-Bayda') and Fathi Ghanim's 1959 *The Mountain* (al-Jabal) should come second. The author as centered consciousness, whose drive for narrative authority came a cropper in *The Committee* and *Zaat*, is in these novels "ultimately silenced as the suspected criminals gradually, communally assume control of the novel's narration" (pp. 113–14). Drumsta might not agree, but the resulting erasure of the author arguably sets up the vacuum that is filled by the alternative epistemology she explores. After all, what could possibly legitimate philosophical idealism as an adjunct of engaged, progressive praxis if not the failure of the latter?

Drumsta's most original argument begins in the Introduction with a brilliant reading of what must be the most docile, unprogressive character in 20th-century literature of any language, Amina, in Naguib Mahfouz's Cairo Trilogy. Drumsta follows Amina to her rooftop garden with its foliage, chickens, and trellises that partially conceal her view of the surroundings, trenchantly pointing out that Amina contrasts with Mitchell's colonial who, also on an elevated perch, is an "isolated, all-seeing subject to world-rendered-up-as-object" (p. 1). Amina putters in her garden, and Drumsta notices: "Everything in Amina's world from earth and sky to animals and plants, is endowed with a kind of life, and is linked in its own mysterious ways with the 'world of spirit'" (p. 2). The alternative Drumsta presents in Amina is not just another critique of the modern subject but a bid for a different, metaphysical ontology. She connects Amina to the Islamic resonances around the Edenic "garden" and a respect for "the unknown." From here, Drumsta can draw a fertile contrast between *taḥqīq*, "state-sanctioned, colonial, and academic truth-seeking practices," and *baḥth* as a metaphysical form of seeking present in these novels that is "less focused on the knowledge itself than on the ethics cultivated in its pursuit" (p. 4). The balance of the book, ending with an epilogue on Ahmed Saadawi's 2013 *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (Frankishtayin fi Baghdad), develops this argument through analyses of detective fiction.

A chapter on Tawfiq al-Hakim's 1937 *Diary of a Country Prosecutor* (*Yawmiyyat Na'ib fi-l-Aryaf*) and Driss Chraïbi's 1981 *Une Enquête au pays* (translated as *Flutes of Death*) reads the investigator-protagonist as a "detective conscript" to highlight the character's effective mobilization into coercive epistemic practices: "The native officer of the law is caught between two ways of seeing, seeking, and being in the world: the communal, colloquial one of his native upbringing, and the isolating, official one of his legal education and police training" (p. 19). Cognizant of how Western detective fiction has historically shorn up the liberal subject, Drumsta shows how the Arab "detective conscript" departs from this model, struggling between positivist investigative methods and a stubborn native episteme. She argues that these novels therefore depict "a simultaneous provincialization of the state's knowledge production and a validation of the supposedly 'backward,' 'uncivilized' practices it claims to replace" (p. 39).

Another strong chapter, on Yusuf Idris's 1959 *The Sinners* (*al-Haram*) and Yusuf al-Qa'id's 1976 *It's Happening Now in Egypt* (*Yahduth fi Misr al-An*) argues for "fiction as a form of incitement" against rural injustice (p. 44). The first half of these novels operates according to what Ross Chambers called "narrative seduction" as events are focalized through the eyes of power—"seeing like an effendi" according to Drumsta (p. 48). Yet just as the reader comes to identify with the rural overseers who regard migrant laborers as a "teeming, animalistic herd," the focalization in the second half shifts to these exploited laborers themselves in a moral bait and switch (pp. 44, 47). The reader is therefore forced to admit complicity in class denigration, and the resulting pang of conscience "incites" one to look beyond binaries. Drumsta calls this "a lesson in historical materialism," in "narrative's ability to transform the nature of knowledge" (p. 67).

In the chapter on Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's 1978 novel, *In Search of Walid Masoud* (*al-Bahth 'an Walid Mas'ud*) and two of Mahfouz's early 1960s short stories, "Culprit Unknown" (*Didd Majhul*) and "Zaabalawi" along with his 1964 short novel *The Way* (*al-Tariq*) Drumsta shows how the madman, shaykh, mystic, or seer often vehicles this alternative way of being in the world. The result is an emphasis on an affective spiritual engagement over "mere change in governmental systems and class conflict" (p. 80). This chapter represents the culmination of the alternative epistemological model Drumsta identifies. She notes that, at least in the case of Mahfouz, the metaphysical detective plot does not exhaust the resonances of meaning in the text; still, "Mahfouz's Arabic keeps the (metaphysical, Islamic) past alive in the (scientific, 'enlightened') present, creating unlikely and surprising juxtapositions, as between detective fiction and Sufi parable, police investigation and mystical seeking" (p. 110).

To be sure, *Ways of Seeking* may find itself excoriated for its refusal to remain within bounds of epistemic materialism; then again, much has changed since 1997.

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