


BOOK REVIEW

## Latin American and Arab Literature: Transcontinental Exchanges

**Tahia Abdel Nasser (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022). Pp. 224. \$103.05 hardcover. ISBN: 9781399507127**

Reviewed by Heba El Attar , Department of World Languages, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH, USA ([h.elattar@csuohio.edu](mailto:h.elattar@csuohio.edu))

In *Latin American and Arab Literature: Transcontinental Exchanges*, Tahia Abdel Nasser takes a decentralized approach to world literature by offering a comparative study between novels, travelogues, and memoirs written in Latin America and the Arab world from the 1960s to the present. The book, comprising five chapters, centers on examining exchanges between Latin America and the Arab world within Third Worldist networks, and focuses on reading Arabic literature within a transcontinental comparative framework.

A South-South dialogue between these two semi-peripheral and/or peripheral regions has been developing since the 19th century as a result of migratory waves from the Levant to the Spanish-speaking continent as well as travels by some Latin American intellectuals to the Orient. This dialogue continued into the 20th century thanks to Third Worldist ideas and anti-imperial networks especially since the Havana Tricontinental. Additionally, the encounter between the two regions was made possible thanks to Arab Hispanism which started in the late 1940s and early 1950s, since Taha Hussein's initiative to establish the Egyptian Institute in Madrid. Arab Hispanism paved the way to direct translation from Spanish into Arabic thereby generating a growing interest among Arab readership for books written by authors from the Spanish-speaking world in general, and from Latin America in particular. Aspects of the encounters between Latin America and the Arab world have been researched by scholars of anthropology, history, or political science. However, comparative studies between the literatures of these two regions have often been less addressed because mastering the two languages, Spanish and Arabic, at the same time, is more common among scholars of Arab countries with strong Hispanism such as Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, and, to a lesser extent, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. Arab Hispanists often publish their comparative studies either in Arabic (e.g. Hamid Abu Ahmad's *Qira'at fi Adab Isbaniyya wa-Amrika al-Latiniyya* [Readings in Spanish and Latin American Literature, 1993]) or in Spanish, in academic journals circulating primarily in Spain. Therefore, Tahia Abdel Nasser, who is based in the Arab world and whose research intersects in part with Arab Hispanism, offers a unique contribution in English on the comparatism between these two world literatures.

The first two chapters of Abdel Nasser's book shed light on direct and indirect encounters between Latin American fiction and the Arab world from the second half of the 20th century up to the present. During that period, an indirect influence of the Arab world/culture on Latin American fiction was facilitated by the long presence of Arab immigrants in the continent. This indirect encounter did not erase Orientalist depictions of Arabs in Latin American fiction written during that period. Unlike the 19th and early 20th centuries, however, it led some Latin American fiction writers to seek familiarizing Latin American readership with the new multi-ethnic realities in Central and South America. This is the case, for

instance, of *Crónica de una Muerte Anunciada* (Chronicle of a Death Foretold, 1981) by Gabriel García Márquez, which revolves around the homicide of Santiago Nasar, son of a wealthy Arab family in Colombia. The ethnic background of Santiago, the main character, is central to the plot because it challenges Eurocentric Orientalism by allowing the reader to acknowledge the absurdity of Santiago's death. For a Latin American readership, such an acknowledgment means that Santiago ceases to be viewed and/or dismissed as an Other; instead, he becomes an integral part of the Caribbean "Us."

Also, since the 1960s, some Latin American fiction and travel writers have had direct contact with the Arab world by traveling to countries like Egypt or Morocco. Often these travelogs or pieces of fiction sought to parody earlier Orientalist travelers from the 19th century (e.g. Héctor Abad Faciolince's *Oriente Empieza en El Cairo* [The Orient Begins in Cairo, 2002]). They also sought to intertwine Latin American and Arab cultures by emphasizing shared experiences, Third World alignments, and solidarity in face of colonialism and imperialism (e.g. Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *La Orilla Africana* [The African Shore, 2010]; Alberto Ruy Sánchez's *Los Nombres del Aire* [The Names of the Air, 1996]).

The other three chapters focus on the encounters between Arab (non)fiction writing and Latin America. These encounters were primarily facilitated by Arab Hispanists' involvement in translating directly from Spanish into Arabic from the 1950s up to the present. This has allowed for a growing interest and demand among Arab readership for literature from the Spanish-speaking world. One influence of Latin American literature in the Arab world could be found in the Arab fiction's adaptation of magical realism and intertextual reworking of well-known Latin American fiction. For instance, in 'Yawm Bwinus Ayris' (The Day in Buenos Aires, 2000) from the collection *al-Qari' al-Baghdadi* (The Reader of Baghdad, 2003), Jabbar Yassin Hussin offers a rewriting of Jorge Luis Borges's *La Busca de Averroes* (Averroes' Search, 1970). The latter focused on the encounter between Averroes and Ancient Greek thought and tradition which, according to the narrator, Averroes was unable to fully understand because he was enclosed in "the orb of Islam." Hussin inverts Borges's story by focusing on Averroes' encounter, in a dream, with the Argentine author in the city of Buenos Aires. Such an encounter between al-Andalus and Latin America transcends temporal and spatial borders, and aims at ascertaining unity of world thought.

Another impact of Latin American literature in the Arab world are the reverberations of Latin American genres such as diaries and/or literary reportage on Arab fiction and nonfiction writing, and the drawing on Latin American literature and political iconography in the work of many Arab writers. Specifically, Arab authors who are engaged with Third World movements found that Latin American literature mirrored shared political struggles against colonialism and neo-imperialism. For instance, in *Warda* (2014), Sonallah Ibrahim draws on Che Guevara's diary as a source of inspiration on revolutionary ideas and heroism for the main character, Warda, during the Dhofar War (1963–76) in Oman and Yemen.

Apart from a relatively brief reference to the impact of Latin American politics on Radwa Ashour, most of the literary works analyzed by Abdel Nasser in this book were written by male authors from Latin America or the Arab world. This could be redressed in future research since the author acknowledges that her book is an initial step that lays the ground for more comparative studies between Latin American and Arab literature. Further comparative research between the literatures of these two regions is likely not only because translation and circulation of Latin American literature is on the rise in the Arab world, but also because, over the past two decades, many Arab authors, male and female, especially from Morocco, have been actively engaged in writing (non)fiction directly in Spanish. Some of these authors received prestigious literary awards in the Spanish-speaking world. This was the case of Najat El Hachmi, who was awarded the Nadal prize in Spain for her novel *El Lunes Nos Querrán* (On Monday They Will Love Us, 2021). Moreover, new publishers such as Diwan, affiliated primarily with Morocco, appear to be committed to making the literature written by Arab authors in Spanish accessible for a wide readership in Latin America.

In sum, Abdel Nasser's book makes a valuable and timely contribution to the discussion on critical topics such as South-South dialogues, Third Worldism, Latin American Orientalism, Arab diaspora, literary translation, decentralization of world literature, and cultural diplomacy, to name a few.