


**The Libyan Novel: Humans, Animals and the Poetics of Vulnerability.** Charis Olszok (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). Pp. 308. \$100.00 hardcover, \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9781474457453

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By giving her book a simple but powerful title (*The Libyan Novel*), Charis Olszok immediately renews the Western gaze both on Libyan literature and on Western criticism of Arabic literature. Until now, critical attention to Libyan literature has focused primarily on short stories and poetry. It should therefore be said that this is the first attempt by critics, at least in the West, to treat the Libyan novel as a purely literary genre whose poetic specificities distinguish it from other Arab novels thus giving it its letters of nobility and revealing its “literary brilliance” (p. 231). Through a rigorous and methodical comparison of some fifty disparate works, the author shows brilliantly how the Libyan novel was built on the poetics of vulnerability that echoed the deleterious atmosphere under the dictatorship of Qaddafi.

Olszok’s main argument is simple and well grounded. She identifies three major constants in Libyan national history: flight, homelessness, and exposure, which have highlighted, as the author puts it in her introduction, “a literary tradition where every story is problematic, both through the horror of telling it, and the danger that telling it brings” (pp. 2–3). Under the dictatorship and the reign of censorship, this “difficulty of story,” as she calls it, stressed the feeling of vulnerability and marked the poetics of the novel from the 1970s to 2011. But, where critics are accustomed to seeing in these novels only social and political fictions with an allusive and subversive narration, Olszok also sees in them a deeply original writing that turns its difficulties into a poetical strength. “This poetics,” she argues, “represents a specificity of the Libyan novel, expressing the ontological, ethical and epistemological uncertainties of existing within a hazardous world” (p. 4). Even though it is true that certain authors, in particular the best known in the West such as al-Kuni and Matar, have given prominence to their mythical Tuareg heritage and have thus made a “different voice” recognized in Arabic literature, the study of a broader body of novels spanning four decades, from al-Nayhum to Bin Shatwan, allows Olszok to refine critical discourse by bringing out a creative function of novelistic writing which, in a way, responds to existential fears formulated above. The Libyan novel in its various subgenres (survival novel, urban novel, *Bildungsroman*, and childhood novel) reveals not only the vulnerability of the Libyan society but more generally the vulnerability of life, not to mention its creatureliness, and in return creates alternate worlds to the “hopeless closure of creaturely life” (p. 21), considering “creatureliness as openness” (p. 21). Drawing primarily on Anat Pick’s monograph *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film*, the author performs on each text an analysis typical of animal studies by exploring the symbols of vulnerability common to man and animal. The choice of this critical approach, namely ecocriticism, is very relevant in different respects. Firstly, being truly interdisciplinary, it echoes the multidisciplinary dimensions of the Muslim, sufi, and Tuareg cosmological backdrop that function as knowledge systems in these novels. It then makes it possible to read at different levels the coherence of a deeper meaning which, in this case, is mainly of a political, ethical, and poetic order. This is what the author means by the subtitle of her book, “poetics of vulnerability.” Then, regarding Libyan literature, this critical approach is undoubtedly the most appropriate to read and decipher the stakes of the Libyan novel in individual or civilizational evolution, marked here by a “primordial turn” (p. 64). The novels she studies in her monograph, characterized by heterogeneous and heterotopic worlds, nested and intertwined in the narration and the discourse, indeed require very particular attention to imaginary



constructions—whether it be “the drama of human fall,” “the imagined realms of prehistory” (p. 67), or the alternate worlds—that precisely call into question the links between man and the immediate environment, featured by the force of nature as well as of polity. And finally, ecocriticism, often presented as the logical continuity of phenomenological and deconstructive continental philosophy, which appeared in the United States from the 1980s at the same time as postcolonial studies, takes into account not only local historical and geographical specificities but more broadly the concept of otherness which is a recurring concern in these novels. Olszok therefore rightly applies this Western reading grid to her body of study.

What should be noted here is that, through very precise and pointed comments, she brings out multiple intertextual links with the most significant texts of the Arab-Muslim and Tuareg heritage, whether it be the Qur’an, folktales, Sufi texts, myths, or even more recently canonized texts of Arabic poetry such as the poetry of Badr Shakir al-Sayyab. However, in my view it is unfortunate that she does not explore more deeply Derrida’s now-famous assertion—*the animal that therefore I am*—and its astonishing affinity with local currents of thought, as, for example, Sufism or Tuareg traditions. This is not to turn a mystical, spiritual, or cosmological thought into a postmodern theory, but to draw attention to the universality of this type of thinking and their fundamental affiliations with poetics and fiction.

The study is structured in three parts and follows a historical framework. The first part is devoted to three well-known writers (al-Nayhum, al-Faqih, and al-Kuni) and their novels from 1970 to 2000. The second and third parts focus on writers from the 2000s (al-Ghazal, al-Kuni, Bushnaf, al-Asfar, al-Maghrabi, Matar, ‘Aqila, al-Fayturi, Bin Shatwan, Ben Hamed). Each part consists of two chapters in which the author exposes methodically text analyses guided by the key notions of “vulnerability” and “creatureliness.” The grouping of texts by chapters and the order in which they are treated seem to depend mostly on the links of influence between the writers. On the one hand, the advantage is that the variations and constants of the evolution of the Libyan novel appear clearly. On the other, the poetics of vulnerability, sometimes associated with a hybrid aesthetic, sometimes with an allegorical tool, sometimes with an ethical meditation, and sometimes with a thematic consistency, can, at times, be more difficult to discern and characterize.

Overall, *The Libyan Novel* should be commended, as it opens up new perspectives for research in Arabic literature. There is no doubt that this study is already a work of reference in literary criticism and, more broadly, in comparative literature. The strength and originality of Olszok’s criticism can be measured by the ethical and ontological affinity that a Western reader may feel through her analyses of texts and, by consequence, through the Libyan novel. Having identified the prominent themes and aesthetics of the novel of the Qaddafi period, she has clearly shown how these novels are made and how literary texts embody nonliterary phenomena. This book now invites us to explore and study the poetics of these novels as a crucial issue in the evolution of the individual and of a civilization. After reading it, one cannot but believe that literature is on the margins of human life.

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