

Petya Tsoneva. *Negotiating Borderlines in Four Contemporary Migrant Writers from the Middle East*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018. 257. ISBN (10): 1-5275-1606-7; ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1606-9.

Negotiating Borderlines appears within a context, albeit one that it does not respond to intentionally or consciously: over the last ten to fifteen years, English Studies has been seeking to reconcile its limitations as a discipline with due reaction to legitimate calls to become more international and transnational in its perspective, its scholarly competence and its conception of literature. The obstacles that, debate suggests, the discipline is correspondingly faced with overcoming comprise principally residual Anglo- and Eurocentrism and a tendency to universalize Anglophone literature, both of which derive in no small part from a widespread and prevalent *cultural monoglossia* – it does not always or even often occur to researchers in the discipline to think outside the Anglophone box – that a supposed hegemony of Anglophone culture and the English language both encourages and at the same time is reinforced by. The support from postcolonial studies and the new “world literature” that English Studies could have drawn upon has, however, been compromised to a degree by the partial and occasional opportunistic subversion and appropriation of these approaches by the very same cultural monoglossia that, it was hoped, they might go some way towards breaking down. To mention just one factor in respect of “world literature,” the considerable number of Anglophone texts that have made it into the frame of new “world literature” (often under the auspices of that dubious convenience “literatures in English”) in contrast to those of even other (old-)world languages such as Spanish or French is enough to make us wonder whether “world lit” is not just another Anglocentric project in disguise. Postcolonial studies, for its part, has on occasion been (mis)used in Anglophone scholarship to lament or berate the discipline’s Anglo- or Eurocentrism without offering a constructive way forward. The question becomes, then, this: how does one reconcile the legitimate demarcations of a subject – English Studies’ pasture is, after all, literature written in the English language – with the need to demonstrate a greater intellectual access to a wider literary world? I believe that the approach adopted in this book, which nonetheless concentrates on English-language texts, facilitates some progress in this process of reconciliation. Its cultural positioning (or more precisely, its inter-positioning of the primary texts, freeing them from the proprietorial label of “literature in English”), brings it closer to the domain of comparative literature than to English Studies; and even if it does qualify for inclusion in the realm of English Studies, it comes with a more credible and respectable letter of introduction to the domain of comparative literature than have other attempts by studies of English-language literature to infiltrate this domain.

Petya Tsoneva’s book reads critically Rabi Alameddine’s *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (2001), Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* (2003), Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) and Elif Shafak’s novel *Honour* (2012). Technically, each one of the writers discussed develops a literary mechanism of border crossing that makes it possible to move along with the narrative current between different cultural traditions, forms of narration and ways of self-location. The question pending that forms the critical focus of this investigation is how such cross-border writers locate themselves through their writing in a fictional border space in which the different places of their biographies fuse into a continuous border, an example of “moving space” that flows beyond firmly-fixed limits. Residing in this fluid space allows them to re-imagine both the “Middle East” and the “West” in their memories, dreams and literary reconstructions as constantly moving thresholds that coincide with their own self-invented positions. Specifically, the critical paradigm turns to narrative and genre studies to locate borderline aspects of their works. They employ patterns of connectivity inherited from oral and artistic traditions such as those recorded in the *Arabian Nights* and the ornamental (mosaic and calligraphic) traditions of arabesque designs. Moreover, these techniques operate within western aesthetic modes of representation and lend their vibrant power of contestation to the migrant narrative perspective. The outcome of such interaction is literary works that not only emerge in border spaces, but also generate a border space that erodes the rigid and violent discourses of border control and elimination of difference.

The book benefits from a wealth of contextual knowledge that embraces and responds to the project’s historical and geo-cultural scope. It refers to and draws on scholarship in a number of relevant areas and disciplines – in this sense the work legitimately merits the designation “interdisciplinary” – and it deploys these judiciously in its elaboration: the author remains in control of the sources and never allows these to speak on her behalf or to take over the narrative. The work also bears witness to familiarity with and apposite recourse

to critical theory: theoretical reference points are always “fit for purpose,” and while the author gives a due nod in the direction of the consecrated and fashionable names and works in this area, she is not afraid to look outside the frame to sources that may be less prominent but that carry an undeniable context-specific authority and pertinence. Consequently, this work does not hide behind the shield of one consecrated approach to the subject, but rather builds its own, made-to-measure methodological and theoretical framework guided by the topic and the need to approach it in a way conducive to its full and fruitful exploitation.

Chapter one provides a comprehensive and well-structured contextual introduction to the field in general and to the works to be studied. The purpose and scope of this chapter is well conceived, as it covers much relevant contextual ground while never losing sight of the project’s more specific aims. The chapters that follow take a text-by-text approach. This can in principle inhibit comparison or cross reference (particularly where circumstance demands that this be of more than a passing or incidental observation), but this problem is avoided by clear signposting and delimitative exposition of each chapter’s aims and objectives that help to frame them as parts of a whole, complementary components that contribute sequentially to a comprehensive, integrated exploration of the overall theme of the book. Internal contextualization also occurs within chapters: the primary works are frequently set in relation to others of a similar generic or thematic kind drawn from a wide pool that extends, gratifyingly in a transcultural study like this one, beyond literature in English as well as beyond contemporary literature. What is more, the division of chapters into sub-sections is sufficiently well handled to sustain integration and connection in the narrative and to avoid the sense of fragmentation that can occur when sub-sections acquire excessive autonomy through lack of authorial attention to interconnection. The work is written in a style in which erudition and a lyricism that lends a certain idiosyncratic somewhat “literary” character to the book’s language, converge for the most part felicitously in what is evidently a very well written book, displaying a grasp and control of style.

In conclusion, this is a thorough, academically rigorous and timely examination of a popular theme from an original and appropriately transnational and theoretically well-informed perspective. Purpose, objectives and focus are explained and justified clearly at relevant stages throughout the work. The style is engaging and eloquently erudite. The work offers an interesting model for the study of literature from a transnational perspective that could help to loosen the persistent hold of the national paradigm on literary studies.

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