

WAÏL HASSAN, *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Pp. 288. \$65.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper. ISBN 9780199792061.

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Waïl Hassan's *Immigrant Narratives* offers an ambitious subtitle: *Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*. Yet this subtitle does not actually encompass the breadth of material Hassan covers. The five key terms of the subtitle have long been multi-definitional (and contested) among literary scholars: "Orientalism"; "Cultural Translation"; "Arab American"; "Arab British"; "Literature." Yet Hassan does little to resolve those terms. This lack of resolution constitutes the strength of Hassan's ambitious project, for he elucidates rather than simplifies, a necessity for those working with the complexities of cultural production in the Arab diaspora.

Hassan thoroughly complicates the terminological commonplaces of dominant epistemologies of the Arab world. His analysis is performed dispassionately, but the very subjects he addresses render that analysis implicitly political, for the act of conceptualizing Arabs as multivalent agents rather than as immobile subjects contravenes a great quantity of conventional wisdom, much of it found in the humanities and social sciences. Hassan sets out this task early in the introduction: "This book is about how Orientalism has profoundly influenced immigrant Arab writers, how they have reacted to it, and how their position as cultural translators has shaped their discourses" (3). Hassan does not necessarily endorse the concept of an authorial translator of culture, but sees it as a critical methodology vis-à-vis his areas of inquiry. He notes, "I argue that the predominant stance of those writers has been that of a cultural translator who claims

a privileged position to interpret the Arab world to American or British readers" (xii).

The view of Arab American and British authors as cultural translators is not without complication. Hassan argues that such authors assign themselves this role, or in some cases are assigned the role by publishers and readers, but the notion of literature existing to satisfy curiosities about foreign cultures has led to variegated modes of exoticization. However, as Hassan notes, it is the very invention of exoticism that attracts publishers and readers in the West to authors of Arab origin. *Immigrant Narratives* explores the processes by which Orientalist discourses continue to influence the production and reception of Anglophone Arab literature. Hassan is also concerned with how the producers of Anglophone Arab literature interact with a set of discourses that precede and presuppose ideas about the Arab writer in modernity.

Hassan is not working with a great deal of prior scholarly material. The vast majority of criticism of Arab writers discusses work in Arabic. Arabic literature has a longer and more distinguished history than Anglophone Arab writing, but this latter category has developed an academic and economic legitimacy in recent decades and needed the sort of thorough analysis that Hassan provides. Much of the extant scholarship on diasporic Arab writers working in English occurs under the rubric of "Arab American literature," a term Hassan does not discard, but contextualizes with other hyphenated national communities: Arab Australian, Arab Canadian, Arab British, and so forth. However, the majority of his discussion is taken up with the United States and United Kingdom, mostly because of sheer quantity, but also because Hassan confesses to finding the "idea of Arab writers who communicate directly in English . . . exhilarating" (xi). It soon becomes clear that a different politics of translation emerges in Anglophone Arab work than that of Arabic-to-English conversion, which Hassan generally finds uninspiring because of what he deems "unsatisfactory and sometimes even prejudicial translations" (xi).

According to Hassan, we cannot fully understand Anglophone Arab literature without thinking about questions of the dialectical relationships among author, reader, and publisher. He argues that "[s]ince the early nineteenth century, Arab modernity, politics, and the very sense of Arab identity have been profoundly impacted by the history of European, and later U.S., imperialism in the Arab world, in which Orientalism has played a central role" (3-4). We have seen similar arguments, most famously in Edward Said's *Culture and*

Imperialism, and more recently in John Carlos Rowe's *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism*, a reworking of Said's title. Hassan is thus working within an established critical tradition. *Immigrant Narratives* separates itself from its forebears by providing close readings of traditional Orientalist narratives from the points of view of native authors engaged with those narratives.

In terms of Arab American literary criticism, Hassan has little to work with, a major reason why *Immigrant Narratives* arrives at an opportune moment. Only a handful of book-length criticism of Arab American writing exists, and, while numerous articles and book chapters are available, the critical tradition is still in an early stage. Along with its inherent quality, this is why *Immigrant Narratives* has the potential for great impact in the new but lively field of Arab American Studies. Hassan draws from extant work in this field, but extends the range of criticism, particularly in his assessment of various historical matters. In this sense, *Immigrant Narratives* exhibits some features of a survey, but Hassan offers more analysis than overview; the historical elements of the book simply extend that analysis to multiple eras, some of them heretofore under-examined. This attention to varying epochs of Arab life in the West illuminates crucial dimensions of contemporary Arab American and British cultural exposition through literary media.

I have in mind Hassan's coverage of *al-Mahjar* ("the immigrants"), the earliest community of Arab American writers. The most famous of this community are Ameen Rihani, Khalil Gibran, Abraham Rihbany, and Mikhail Naimy. *Al-Mahjar* writers were primarily from what is now Lebanon and at the turn of the 20th century was still greater Syria, of Christian (mainly Maronite) descent, and engaged actively in the affairs of the Middle East, particularly their opposition to Ottoman rule. *Al-Mahjar* have received passing mention and isolated analysis, but Hassan devotes considerable attention to them. While they were not homogenous philosophically or stylistically, Hassan observes that "the discursive challenge facing them was to replace Orientalist valuations with a model of duality without hierarchy, whereby the contrasting essences were seen as existing in a sort of metaphysical equilibrium and reciprocity: East and West complement, need, and have something to teach each other" (42-43).

He devotes an entire chapter to the most famous early Arab American author—indeed probably the most famous Arab American author of any era—Kahlil Gibran. Hassan's analysis of Gibran is too nuanced to reduce to adjectives such as "unfavorable" or "negative," but it is clear Hassan is skeptical about Gibran's tremendous

commercial success and his lofty position in the Arab American literary community; he notes that Rihani and Rihbany had produced more copious and rigorous work. Hassan provides numerous reasons for the American infatuation with Gibran despite Gibran's mixed reception among Arab American critics. The primary reason for that infatuation, Hassan argues, is because of Gibran's image in the United States as mystical Eastern sage.

Another notable feature of *Immigrant Narratives* is Hassan's analysis of Rabih Alameddine. Unlike *al-Mahjar*, Alameddine has been subject to considerable critique, the majority of it performed by critics specializing in Arab American literature. Hassan has offered what is to date the most thorough assessment of Alameddine, a difficult author to discuss because of his imaginative structural and aesthetic devices. Hassan claims that Gibran does not offer the critic an opportunity for rigorous analysis. With Alameddine, such opportunities abound. Hassan approaches Alameddine in conjunction with scholar and fiction writer Ramzi Salti. Hassan conjoins these two writers in order to assess how sexualities can be represented in the United States (in the case of Alameddine) and in the Arab World (Jordan specifically, in the case of Salti).

Hassan's discussion of Salti highlights Salti's representations of different forms of sexual performance in Jordan and the United States, what Hassan dubs a "dual level of meaning" (203). Salti, Hassan argues, condemns (implicitly and explicitly) forms of homophobia in the Arab World, some of them the discursive collateral of colonization and others seemingly rooted in autochthonous cultural traditions (finding the difference between the two is not a simple matter). Salti runs the risk of being called an anti-Arab racist because of his strong tone about Arab sexism and homophobia, something that indeed has happened, but Hassan points out that Salti carefully avoids narratives of atavistic barbarity in favor of a critique that universalizes the social ills he condemns.

Alameddine, on the other hand, prefers the hilarity of irreverence. Alameddine is not easy to critique, so Hassan is to be commended for so thoroughly exploring the author's intimidating oeuvre. Hassan describes *Koolaid*s accurately, not an easy task: "The novel itself seems to embody. . . absurdity, both in terms of its philosophical outlook and its bricolage form comprising fragmentary narration, multiple narrators, intertwining plots, a motley cast of characters (including Eleanor Roosevelt, Krishnamurti, Julio Cortázar, and Tom Cruise), and intermingling of history and fiction, tragedy and

farce" (207). While a thorough discussion of Alameddine is beyond the capacity of this review, I would suggest that he is the sort of author whose work requires an imaginative critic for the work to be adequately critiqued. Hassan is up to the challenge.

A noteworthy feature of *Immigrant Narratives*, in fact, is Hassan's fearlessness in approaching complicated and controversial topics. Another noteworthy feature of the book is his impressive range of knowledge of writers in both Arabic and English. This knowledge allows Hassan to provide ample context for the writers, epochs, and geographies he covers. While the contextual parts of the book are good, Hassan is at his best as a traditional literary critic, one who reads closely and writes clearly. Those interested in writers in the West of Arab origin will find *Immigrant Narratives* immensely helpful. Those interested in strong literary criticism will find value in the book as well.