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## Introduction: Literature and Reality

The world we live in is a part of us and we are a part of it. Every day we experience its injustice, as well as the happiness it gives us. All this is reflected in art, music and literature; for human beings they are an alternative world – one that they create on their own but, at the same time, closely related to their everyday lives. We cannot tear ourselves away from it – if only because it is impossible. And this applies to all cultures of the world, because in their nature people are not as different from each other as it sometimes seems.

This book is a further proof of that. It is a description of fragments of the represented world as seen through the eyes of Arab writers and poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, including Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese, Egyptian, Omani, Tunisian and Algerian literature. In this way, we get an insight into different literary traditions, although they have a lot in common, as they derive from the common stem of classical Arabic literature. Of course, it is not a complete picture of what we can observe in literature, but it is a reflection of the research interests of individual authors, representing European and Arab scientific circles: British, Polish, Romanian, French, Italian, Iraqi, Omani, Egyptian and Algerian.

The volume is the outcome of the *International Conference on Modern Arabic Literature – between Myth and Reality*, which was organized by the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Faculty of Oriental Studies of the University of Warsaw on June 1–2, 2023.

What is the eponymous “represented world”? Dictionaries of literary theory and textbooks of poetics explain this in detail. It has various aspects, such as time, space, characters, cultural contexts, plots, etc. It is also an “imaginary world” in which reality is often mixed with fantasy, and myth with documentary, and everything is processed by the author’s emotions and experiences, and is related to his or her experiences or beliefs. In this way, material is created for literary scholars, who, in turn, add their own experiences and beliefs, as well as their specific research skills, to the world represented in the literary text.

The proposed book is divided into two parts, which reflect the two main aspects of the world represented in contemporary Arabic prose and poetry raised by the authors.

The section entitled *Tradition and Fantasy* comprising 7 papers shows how mythical elements interact with the reality described in selected works of Arabic

literature. The works of Arabic classics of contemporary literature, such as Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm, Maḥmūd al-Mas‘adī and Badr Šākīr as-Sayyāb, as well as writers and poets who are just shaping their artistic personality and building their brand, were analysed. It is worth noting here the relatively wide presence of quite young Omani literature, which has so far been poorly analyzed in Arabic studies.

The texts in this section show the importance of the coexistence of tradition, myth and metaphor in Arabic literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Of particular importance here is tradition, which sets the paths for the development of this literature and is invariably a point of reference for it – whether through its acceptance or rejection. At the same time, it is worth remembering that this tradition is shaped to a large extent by Islam, without which it is difficult to imagine the culture of the Arab world – not only literature, which is the axis of the presented book.

Part Two, *Politics, History, and Society*, explores other aspects of contemporary Arabic literature. Not only its traditional, mythological or metaphorical contexts turn out to be important, but also social and political ones. Although such a connection – for example, metaphor with society – may seem surprising at first glance, it is the reality of the world depicted in the works of Arab authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. References to reality do not have to be limited to this particular reality. What is mythical and fantastic may reflect the problems faced by Arab societies. This applies to both gender and generational divides. Nowadays, and rightly so, forms of creativity are included in the framework of literature that until recently had been neglected by literary scholars – either because of their form or language. The Arabic reality can be depicted both in the literary language and in the language of the street. After all, it is the street that can transform reality, as it happened during the events of the “Arab Spring”. Political elites or social elites no longer have the ability to suppress the voice of those sections of society that have traditionally had little to say, such as women and the youth. And while women’s voices have been clearly heard for decades, young people have not had the right to speak until recently, and certainly no one has listened to them. However, the world is changing, and Arab societies are responding to this call, as evidenced by the articles presented in the volume.

As I mentioned at the beginning, the “represented world” is, among others, time, space, characters, or cultural contexts. Of course, the texts presented in this book illustrate only a part of the rich and complex mosaic that is every society and every culture. What is important, however, is the novelty and freshness of the authors’ perspectives. The way they perceive this represented world – whether by analysing well-known works or the latest literary works – is a good introduction to further research and an encouragement towards it. Contemporary Arabic literature is not a static phenomenon. Also, the research that concerns it does not remain at the level of a simple content analysis. The authors use a variety of methodologies, not afraid of the dangers that may be associated with it. This is done by scholars from various

countries, representatives of both the older generation, who have been developing their research skills for many years, and those who are just beginning their struggle with the complex literary matter.

For these reasons, we believe that the Warsaw conference on Arabic literature served the discussion on these topics well. It was a discussion between generations and, importantly, a discussion between different methodologies and between researchers from different scientific traditions, as the participants emphasized. The texts included in the volume have been published in the languages in which they were originally delivered, thus emphasizing the role of Arabic in Arabic literary studies, which can not only be an object of study, but also a tool that researchers can use to describe the phenomena they analyze. Equally important is the fact that Arab scholars are familiar with the methods developed by the West and vice versa, as is the possibility of a lively discussion between Western Arabists and those of the Arab world in the language that is the subject of their study.

Oriental studies are based on intercultural dialogue, which is worth remembering. And such dialogue, if it is to be genuine, should allow both sides to speak. We are convinced that this modest volume is a document of such a dialogue.

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