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The Experimental Turn in the Moroccan Novel, 1976-1989,

by Anouar El Younssi, New York, Routledge, 2025, ISBN: 978-1-032-61366-6

Hakima Choukri
Abdelmalek Essaadi University
LLCIS Research Laboratory

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Hakima Choukri is a PhD student at the Linguistic, Literary, Cultural and Interdisciplinary Studies Research Lab at the University of Abdelmalek Essaadi, Tetouan, Morocco. Her research interests include minority fiction, indigenous ecofeminist literature, and postcolonial trauma theory.

hakima.choukri@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5531-455X

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Book Review

The Experimental Turn in the Moroccan Novel, 1976-1989

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Anouar El Younssi's *The Experimental Turn in the Moroccan Novel, 1976-1989,* is an indispensable project to the contemporary surge in Moroccan literary production. It maps a new trajectory for Moroccan literary history and evolution. While he conveniently builds upon previous evaluations by prominent critics like Said Yaqtine, Muhammad Amansur, and Abdilali Butayyib, Younssi is one of the few scholars theorizing about the Moroccan novel in English. By doing so, Younssi aspires to bring Moroccan literature to the recognition and visibility of Anglo-American academics and English-language translators, thereby increasing Anglophone readers' accessibility to Moroccan literature and situating the latter within the world literature canon. Younssi bestows upon the Moroccan novel the same literary prestige as its Mashriqi counterpart has enjoyed by positioning it within the broader Arabic literary and cultural contexts and exploring its engagement with cosmopolitan trends in Western literature. He draws on various Arab and Western theorists and novelists, including Roland Barthes, Sigmund Freud, Naguib Mahfouz, Abdulkarim Ghallab, and Mikhail Bakhtin, to illustrate the theoretical and literary intersections of the Moroccan experimental novel.

Younssi's analysis focuses on three trendsetting sources: Ahmad al-Madini's *Zaman bayna al-Wiladah wa al-Hulm*, or *Time between Birth and Dream* (1976); Muhammad Barradah's *The Game of Forgetting* (1987); and Abdullah al-Arwi's *Papers: Idriss' Intellectual Auto/biography* (1989). The monograph treats these novels as quintessentially experimental, redefining fundamental concepts related to literary experimentalism and ultimately reconceptualizing the Moroccan and Arab experimental tendencies. For example, it politicizes realism and challenges its commonly established incompatibility with experimentalism. The Moroccan experimental novel, Younssi argues, serves as a realistic reflection of the socio-political conditions of Moroccan postcoloniality. It is geared toward a (re)generation of literary originality through an open dialogue with al-turath or the Arab-Islamic tradition and Western literary and theoretical currents. This transgenerational and transcultural dialogue is a literary metonymy of the dialogue that post-independence Moroccan society created to renegotiate a Moroccan identity conflicted about allegiance to Arab-Muslim tradition and a postcolonial cultural openness. By contextualizing Moroccan novelistic experimentation in a socio-culturally ambiguous milieu, Younssi credits al-tajrib writers with a noble *raison d'être* that demonstrates the literary current's socio-political awareness and sensibility. The experimentalist ambition for narrative, stylistic, and generic novelty reflects the intrinsic need for ideological and literary gentrification.

Younssi's research mobilizes theoretically pertinent approaches that attest to its incisiveness. It provides a multifarious analysis enriched by historical snippets and the socio-political zeitgeist. Arming his analysis with a postcolonial lens, Younssi de-Westernizes and provincializes the history of Arab literature, linking the Arabic and Moroccan novel to Arab-Islamic literary heritage, emancipating it from literary reliance on Western prototypes, and revisualizing its autonomy and authenticity. While he conforms to the mainstream view that recognizes Mahfuzian literature as the *beau idéal* of Arabic literary modernity, Younssi problematizes the perception of the Mahfuzian oeuvre as a reproduction of Dickensian and

Contact ✉ hakima.choukri@etu.uae.ac.ma

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Balzacian composition. He reminds his reader of Mahfuz's post-1967 works, through which the Nobel laureate emerged as an authentic voice for socio-political concerns, laying the thematic groundwork for later socio-politically cognizant Arab and Moroccan authors, such as Ghallab, who is considered Mahfuz's Moroccan incarnation. One of the book's scholarly accomplishments, Younssi bridges literary and political history by marking the year 1967, which witnessed Arab defeat in the Six-Day War with Israel, as a climacteric stage for Arab literary authenticity. Such recaptured authenticity is epitomized by "intertextuality," whereby the Arabic novel engages in an experimental discourse with tradition, thus invalidating the recalcitrance often associated with experimentalism. Younssi's reevaluation of the multifaceted interconnection between Moroccan al-tajrib and Arab-Islamic al-turath is configured through a triadic model of tradition. Younssi outlines the religious tradition critiqued through al-Madini's subtextual aesthetics-substance correlation while foregrounding the philosophical and historical tradition addressed in al-Arwi's *Awraq* and highlighting the invocation of Moroccan popular tradition in Barradah's debut novel. This groundbreaking model demystifies previous misconceptions about experimentalism's antithetical relation to tradition.

Younssi's critical thoroughness highlights previously unexplored aspects of the Moroccan experimental novel. Al-Madini's novel is studied as an example of experimentalism's simultaneous critique of and engagement with Arab-Islamic heritage, reflecting the evolution of Moroccan postcolonial consciousness. Younssi designates *Zaman* as the precursor of Moroccan experimentalism that expands the stylistic terrain of the text to encompass extratextual spheres. He reads the psychological despair and gloominess depicted in the novel as a textual reflection of the exoteric sense of defeat engulfing the Moroccan and Arab collective psyche after 1967. The novel, Younssi adds, espouses a "poetics of dissent" that challenges the dominant patriarchal and ideological metanarratives of post-independence Moroccan reality. Younssi is particularly invested in the novel's fusion of aesthetic and political dimensions as one of the fundamental elements of Moroccan experimentalism. He also locates this intersection in al-Arwi's work, which he designates as an experimental novel par excellence for its refusal of generic and ideological conventionality and its engagement in a manifold critique that addresses both form and ideology, aiming to regenerate Moroccan and "Arab/Arabo-Amazigh" subjectivity and literary originality. This quest is shared by Barradah, who explores narrative methods to create a textual portrait of the extratextual, experimental reality in modernist Morocco. Younssi highlights Barradah's experimental mobilization of Bakhtinian heteroglossia to question the socio-political vicissitudes of the post-independence context. Younssi's ability to bring the Moroccan experimental novel into dialogue with its Western and non-Western references while highlighting its autonomy is one of the book's major strengths.

Younssi's criticism redefines experimentalism from the perspective of Moroccan literary and socio-political progression. It pinpoints the Western trends with which the experimental novel engages and investigates the latter's subtextual convolutions with Arab-Islamic heritage as a symptom of literary openness rather than blind adoption. Younssi revisits the concept of "compromise" to track the experimental novel's oscillation between innovation and tradition. He successfully refutes different misconceptions surrounding Moroccan experimentalism. However, Younssi's examination is unsuccessful in incorporating gendered narratives and consequently occludes the potential female contribution to Moroccan experimentalism. This absence results in an androcentric, one-dimensional depiction of Moroccan literature. Moroccan women authors like Halima Ben Haddou and Leila Abouzeid, whose works fall within the titular timeline, are neither referenced nor suggested as works belonging to the same literary and socio-cultural scene as the examined sources. This also establishes a preference for the male literary experience as the trendsetter, inferring the inaptness of gendered writings to engender novel and novelistic trends. The book's disregard for Moroccan female-authored

works compromises the consistency of its conclusion that the new Moroccan novel was an integral part of the (post)modernist project in Morocco, especially considering the significance of the feminist cause and writings to the inauguration of Moroccan modernity and the postcolonial dialogue between innovation and traditionalism.

The book's discussion additionally misses previously published works that introduce and detail literary trailblazers authored by Arab and Moroccan women. Bouthaina Shaaban's *Voices Revealed: Arab Women Novelists, 1898-2000* (2009) and Joseph T. Zeidan's *Arab Women Novelists* (1995) enlist numerous female voices that have shaped Arab literary and cultural modernity whereas Suellen Diaconoff's (2009) survey *The Myth of the Silent Woman* explores the Moroccan female literary arena, including post-independence women authors. Younssi's reference to Arab literature, on the other hand, is markedly informed by Roger Allen's *The Arabic Novel,* which dedicates only a few pages to women-authored works in Arabic literature. One of Younssi's main contributions is emphasizing the 1967 devastation as a catalyst for Arab and Moroccan literary originality. While Younssi thoroughly explores how Arab and Moroccan novelists, such as Mahfuz and al-Madini, textually embody the consequent socio-political and historical desolation, he excludes Arab female authors, such as Liana Badr, whose works also novelize the general state of despair following the Arab-Israeli war. Younssi's study, furthermore, exhibits a scholarly fixation on the Egyptian, particularly Mahfuzian, novel as an initiator of literary discourses despite its aspiration to situate the Moroccan experimental novel within the broader Arabic literature. It overlooks the equally invaluable contributions of Syrian and Palestinian novelists, for instance, to Arabic literary experimentation and only passingly refers to other Maghribi experimental works.

The growing interest in the Moroccan novel has created a scholarly need for elaborate studies such as Younssi's. Through his innovative project, Younssi posits a "third" space that allows for the equal incorporation of innovation, tradition, and modernity in Moroccan experimentalism. Younssi delineates the achievability of such an avant-garde amalgamation through various textual methods, primarily fragmentation, which orients the correlation between experimentalism's aesthetics and content by sustaining the subtextual interaction with the Arab-Muslim tradition while simultaneously exploring innovative and universal paradigms. In other words, Moroccan experimentalism traverses Western literary routes without renouncing local literary rites. Younssi should be credited for reclaiming the Arabic and Moroccan experimental novel's indebtedness to Arab-Islamic literary heritage and emphasizing its engagement with the post-independence status quo. Younssi's research can be situated within the postcolonial project to de-Westernize literary studies. It successfully clears Mashriqi and Maghribi experimentalism from Western influence and underscores its quest for stylistic and generic originality and independence. *The Experimental Turn* is an illuminating study of Moroccan literary modernity and an imperative read for critics, litterateurs, and comparative researchers. While it is a trailblazing project in Moroccan literary scholarship, its limitations pave the way for more nuanced research highlighting gendered and other Maghribi contributions to the experimental shift in Moroccan literature.