

On Four Contemporary Migrant Writers from the Middle East and Their Negotiations of Borderlines



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Petya Tsoneva Ivanova, *Negotiating Borderlines in Four Contemporary Migrant Writers from the Middle East*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018. Pp. 272

Petya Tsoneva Ivanova's book *Negotiating Borderlines in Four Contemporary Migrant Writers from the Middle East* is a feast for the mind and soul. It cuts across geopolitical spaces, cultures, languages and disciplines, combining theories and approaches in fields as diverse as philosophy, political theory, anthropology, cultural studies, aesthetics, etc.

Focusing on the postcolonial issues of borders and migration, the author draws on the theories and discourses of Michel Foucault, Nicole Schroeder, Syed Islam, Gloria Anzaldù and Stephen Clingman to argue that boundaries "are not as much sites of division/connection, but movements of transition in the continuous flow between places/times/identities" (p. viii). Tsoneva Ivanova's inquisitive mind

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throws into question the deep-seated assumptions that the “Middle East” is a region of impermeable borders, and challenges our minds to think across them by looking into the transcultural phenomena of travel, migration and diversity, beyond rivers into a “topology of fluctuation,” beyond fact into fiction, beyond the colonial Self into “the colonial Other,” and into the Islamic aesthetics whose “ornamental calligraphic lines of arabesques weave twists and tangles, swerves, labyrinth-like loops and circles that seem to continue to infinity” (p. 30). Inspired by the Islamic spirit of beyondness and infinity, Tsoneva Ivanova’s metadiscourse is a beautiful yarn of metaphoric arabesques defying borders of all kinds.

The introductory chapter “Beyond the Banks of the Euphrates: Rivers and Borders. Towards a Typology of Fluctuation” provides the readers with a symbolically and mythically charged onset, the Euphrates, whose liquid and protean nature suggests migration, nomadism, border-crossing, liminality and narrativity. This flexible frame is meant to contain a plethora of theoretical models of border space from Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane* through Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical approaches to our experience of space, Syed Islam’s approach to self and alterity to Tim Ingold’s anthropological theory of lines that connect the arts and their aesthetics across time and space. Tsoneva Ivanova’s historical account of the “Middle East,” which is a cultural, linguistic and narrative construct whose main tenet is liminality, draws on Foucault’s perspectives to follow its representation based both on political facts and imaginary projections rooted in myth and storytelling. Migrant writing is approached through Søren Frank’s theory of dislocation, exodus and *dissemiNation* and Stephen Clingman’s “grammar of identity,” leading the author of *Negotiating Borderlines* to the discovery of the aesthetics of “a fictional border space” (p. xi), which she reads in the four novels that she deems emblematic of borderline negotiations: Rabih 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 *Honour* (2012).

The journey into this vast fictional border space begins in Chapter 2, which focuses on Rabih Alameddine’s *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters*, which, as Tsoneva Ivanova argues, is “an aesthetic solution to a profoundly ethical problem” (p. xii). The book’s fragmented narratives suggest the characters’ protean identities, whose destinies

are shaped by border crossing. Alameddine translates the Lebanese uncertain and insecure political situation after the war into an experimental narrative of unfinished first chapters, a technique redolent of Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, and a series of self-portraits, redolent of Shahrazad's serial narrative in *The Arabian Nights*. Sarah, the protagonist of the novel, crosses borders in time (past and present) and space (Lebanon and the US), and her experience of her own self is also a never-ending crossing of borders in a novel overbrimming with tropes of fluidity.

Chapter 3, "Migrant New Moons: Navigating Border Space in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*" continues the journey in search for absent homes. The crescent is a visual symbol of various degrees and levels of incompleteness, both macro- and micro-cosmic. With its vast geography of desert and ocean and their mirroring effects, *Crescent* is another story of border-crossing, here between the US and Iraq, in Tsoneva Ivanova's book.

With its fairy-tale title, Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* adds a new chapter to *Negotiating Borderlines*. The territory explored here is one of quick sands. Jassim and Salwa, the protagonists of the story, travel for insecurity between the deserts of their native Jordan and those of Arizona in search for deceptive opportunities. Tsoneva Ivanova contends that Halaby weaves a story around issues of place and belonging and the perils of straddling cultures in the post-9/11 world. At the same time, *Once in a Promised Land* provides the author of *Negotiating Borderlines* with a new set of tropes of fluidity to complete her chart of "fluid topography" (p. xiv). The liminality of space is reflected in the mirror of the characters' liminality, which is an ongoing negotiation for their Arab American identity.

In Tsoneva Ivanova's reading, Elif Shafak's *Honour* "turn[s] the Middle East inside out," being "a cross-border text that negotiates geographical, cultural and generational distance" (p. xiv). Shafak's "twinning, reverse migrations and mirrored experience" (p. xiv) are narrative techniques that seem to translate the visual arabesques, being aesthetic transpositions of the characters' displacements and twisted replacements.

I would like to highlight Tsoneva Ivanova's argument in two interconnected subchapters of chapter 1, "A Matter of Proximity and Distance" and "The Colonial Other," which are important contributions to the theory of the cultural construction and representation of the "Middle East." The process of borderline

formation is carefully traced to the epic texts of the Old Testament, a few recorded poems of Persian minstrels, Ferdowsi, the greatest epic poet of Persia's *Book of Kings*, and, at a later date, to the legendary conquests of Alexander the Great and their echoes in the Hellenic texts and rewrites. The exploration of the "Middle East" as a geocultural construct leads Tsoneva Ivanova to the conclusion that the Orientalisation of the East in scholarly discussions gradually produced "a kaleidoscopic multitude of 'East,' 'Middle East' and 'West,' dispersed throughout individual stories and experiences" (p. 13). To complicate things, the decline of the Ottoman Empire "segregated" the politicians, i. e. the cultural establishment, from artists and scholars. Tsoneva Ivanova explains that "while nineteenth-century politicians drew sedentary lines on their maps of the East, poets, artists and scholars elaborated more ethereal and flexible, though equally untrustworthy versions of the Orient" (p. 19). It is precisely this mythology of the Orient based on dissemination and culturally dichotomised constructions that Tsoneva Ivanova analyses in terms of borderline negotiations in her book.

In "A Place of Silent Stories" Tsoneva Ivanova argues that postcolonial literatures "give voice to silent stories or reconstitute suppressed memories," and, "like Shahrazad's storytelling, resume the suspended ends of historical fact, personal loss, political crime," "turn[ing] previously established binary relations upside down, inhabit[ing] European genres only to subvert them, feed[ing] on marginal plots only to relocate them in the centre, contaminat[ing] national languages, produc[ing] Babel-like scripts, mix[ing] secular and religious perspectives, and all the while cross[ing] so many borderlines" (p. 26).

Negotiating Borderlines is an exploration of what Petya Tsoneva Ivanova calls a "borderline sensibility" (p. 29) that, in its sinuous arabesques, goes against the grain of the straight line. The discussion of Islamic aesthetics is one of the delicious treats of her beautifully wrought book. Having its origins in the Islamic spirituality, the technique of the arabesque, a European coinage, was used by the Renaissance artists, who called it "*arabesco*, referring to an imaginative Arabic style" (p. 30). In time, the arabesque took the meaning of "a broad gamut of artistic, literary and architectural undertakings that developed as an intricate lacework of elements branching from each other and forming endless repetitive structures" (p. 30). Tsoneva Ivanova's own "borderline sensibility" subtly

extrapolates the Islamic aesthetics of the arabesque to the cultural pattern of entanglements, border crossings and heterogeneity of all kinds to read four stories of a “Middle East” whose real and imaginary borderlines blur, (re)emerge and blur again.