

BOOK REVIEWS

ČIŽMÍKOVÁ, Danuša. *Hľadanie identít v modernej libanonskej ženskej próze* [The Quest for Identities in Modern Lebanese Women's Fiction]. Brno: MuniPress, 2022. 122 p. ISBN 978-80-280-0084-4.
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The Lebanese Civil War (1975 – 1990) was a conflict that affected every aspect of the country's living reality, including the overall character and development of literature in Lebanon. This traumatic experience not only contributed to the rising dominance of literary fiction, especially that of the novel, as opposed to poetic genres, which were preferred before,¹ but it profoundly impacted authors' choice of writing techniques and narrative strategies. So far, the attention of scholars in the field of literary studies has focused either on the way this traumatic experience is captured and processed in Lebanese fiction² or emphasised the gendered perspective of the conflict through the writings of Lebanese women writers.³ In her monograph *Hľadanie identít v modernej libanonskej ženskej próze* [The Quest for Identities in Modern Lebanese Women's Fiction], Danuša Čižmíková looks at women's (post-) civil war writing in Lebanon through the lens of identity construction and power dynamics. Nevertheless, the gender aspect plays an essential role in literary texts as well as in Čižmíková's analysis. In this respect, the book can be considered a continuation of Lebanese (post-) civil war literature research conducted by M. Cooke, F. Lang, D. Mostafa, S. Hout and others, and it offers a valuable contribution to the academic debate concerning the subject.

The aim of the monograph is “to introduce two of the most prominent female writers of the [Lebanese] (post-) war novel” (p. 9), whose works represent historical milestones

¹ MEJCHER-ATASSI, S. On the Necessity of Writing the Present: Elias Khoury and the “Birth of the Novel” in Lebanon. In NEUWIRTH, A., PFLITSCH, A., WINCKLER, B. (eds.). *Arabic Literature: Postmodern Perspectives*, p. 92.

² For example, LANG, F. *The Lebanese Post-Civil War Novel: Memory, Trauma and Capital*; MOSTAFA, D. S. Literary Representations of Trauma, Memory, and Identity in the Novels of Elias Khoury and Rabī' Jābir. In *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 2009, Vol. 40, pp. 208–236. See also HOUT, S. *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in the Diaspora*.

³ For example, COOKE, M. *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War*.

in both Lebanese and Arabic fiction written by women. The monograph “explores women’s response to the war in Lebanon as well as the ways in which Arabophone female writers have transformed their specific war experience into creative literary activity, both during and after the war” (p. 112). These novels, namely *Hikāyat Zahra* (The Story of Zahra) by Ḥanān ash-Shaykh and *Maryam al-ḥakāyā* (Maryam, Keeper of Stories) by ‘Alawīya Ṣubḥ, which were written and published more than two decades apart (1980 and 2002), represent different approaches to the literary portrayal of the (post-)war reality and illustrate the changes that Lebanese literature, especially that written by female authors, has gone through. According to Čižmíková, one of the most striking differences between the writing during and after the war lies in a different approach to writing about war: while the first generation of writers tended to deny the reality of war and tried to capture their experience in a subtle and discreet way, their successors opt for a direct, more violent portrayal of the conflict and have chosen narratives of trauma to reconstruct the memory of war-stricken Beirut and tackle that traumatic experience.

The monograph consists of three chapters which are further divided into several sub-chapters. The first part, “Conflict through the eyes of women,” provides the reader with a brief introduction to the subject, tracing the origin and development of women’s civil war fiction in Lebanon. The chapter concentrates primarily on the works of Ġāda as-Sammān, Emily Naṣrallāh, Laylā ‘Usajrān, Īmān Ḥumaydān Yūnis and Najwā Barakāt, with particular emphasis on the two key authors Ḥanān ash-Shaykh (1945) and ‘Alawīya Ṣubḥ (1955), whose novels are analysed in the following chapters of the monograph. Here, D. Čižmíková is correct to express her reservations about the use of the label “Beirut Decentrists”, which was coined by M. Cooke to denote literary works by Lebanese female writers during the civil war, pointing out its inaccuracy and somewhat artificial categorisation of diverse literary texts into one group. However, since the use of the term has already been established among the academics she continues to use it for better clarity and consistency (p. 18, note no. 14). The second chapter focuses on Ḥanān ash-Shaykh’s famous novel *The Story of Zahra*. It offers a well-grounded, in-depth analysis of the literary work, based primarily on methods of close reading and J. Butler’s subjectivation concept, but she also uses Foucault’s theory of power, Nancy Chodorow’s sociology of gender and, last but not least, the research of the Lebanese psychotherapist Muṣṭafā Hijāzī. The main focus of the monograph is on “the heroines’ identity formation within the confines of patriarchy” (p. 112) against the background of the violent conflict.

Ash-Shaykh’s character of Zahra strives to find her voice, which has been suppressed due to the traditional perception of female and male roles in society and her subsequent gendered upbringing that favours male over female offspring. Interestingly, Čižmíková identifies Zahra’s relationship with her mother as the most complex one (frequently referred to through the symbolism of a “navel orange”, in Arabic *burtuqāla wa surratuhā*) since mothers as caregivers are usually the ones responsible for the transfer of traditional cultural norms and patterns of acceptable behaviour, by which they “perpetuate the structures of patriarchal oppression” (p. 113).

While Zahra’s attempts at liberation mostly take the forms of sexual encounters, madness and finally result in death, protagonists of the second of the novels analysed, *Maryam, the Keeper of Stories* by ‘Alawīya Ṣubḥ, apply a different strategy of survival; theirs is the legacy of the world’s most famous narrator – Shahrazād. Through the act of

storytelling, not only do the female protagonists defy death, but they sustain life, which is beautifully emphasised through the water symbolism. Moreover, they also manage to subvert the existing power relations and undermine patriarchal discourse. In the third chapter, Čižmíková explores “how the blurring of the lines between storytelling and writing, between the past and the present, between the author and the character and, last but not least, between the creation of a work of literature and the construction of the subject, all contribute to illuminating the fluid boundaries between ‘telling’, writing and becoming” (p. 113). As the author of the monograph suggests, the identity construction in Šubh’s novel is realised through storytelling since stories not only reflect reality but they have the capacity to create a new reality. Čižmíková then continues to analyse this multilayered, polyphonic novel using Julia Kristeva’s theory of language, especially the concepts of symbolic vs semiotic modality, which she applies to compare male and female creative approaches to storytelling.

The war temporarily destabilised prevailing norms in Lebanese society and, in so doing, it contributed to increased social mobility. It also enabled marginalised citizens (including women) to better integrate into society and gain more control over their lives. However, with the conflict coming to an end, as Čižmíková notes, many women returned to the so-called “institutions of oppression” (mostly family and marriage) which they had fought so hard to gain independence from.⁴ Nevertheless, both novels manage to deconstruct the dominant war narrative, presented mainly from the masculine point of view: images from the battlefield are replaced with those of everyday life during the war. But as Čižmíková suggests, this portrayal is in many respects more authentic since it manages to capture the conflict in all its extensity, including its impact on the lives of individuals, their everyday problems as well as their coping with traumatic experiences and losses, but also their resilience and resolve to survive.

This monograph is a valuable contribution to the field of literary studies. It is very well-written and equally well-researched. The author uses a wide range of scholarly literature in English, Arabic, Czech and Slovak to support her arguments, including the works of J. Butler, M. Foucault, J. Flax, N. Chodorow, J. Kristeva, P. Bourdieu, H. Cixous, M. Bakhtin, L. Irigaray, E. Farkašová, R. Jacquemond, M. Cooke, F. Lang, M. Hījāzī, ‘A. Zarāqit, Y. al-‘Īd and others. The analyses of the novels are based on their Arabic originals with extensive excerpts given in both their Arabic original and Slovak translation, which proves not only Čižmíková’s exceptional translation skills but her excellent understanding of Arabic as well. I appreciate particularly her creative approach to the structure of the monograph and the titles of individual chapters/subchapters, which reflects the intertextuality and circularity of the literary works analysed. D. Čižmíková’s monograph is written in the Slovak language, and therefore, it will be most valuable for Slovak and Czech readers, especially since the subject of Arabic literature, in general, and Lebanese women’s fiction, in particular, is considerably understudied in both countries. I strongly recommend this book to those interested in Arabic or world literature

⁴ The author gives credit for the term to the Moroccan writer ‘Abd al-Qādir Bin ‘Alīm (Abdelkadir Benali), who used it during their conversation in 2012 (p. 111).

and gender studies and to scholars as well as students in the field of Middle Eastern studies.

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