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*The Literature of the Lebanese Diaspora* by Jumana Bayeh  
(review)

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**JUMANA BAYEH**, *The Literature of the Lebanese Diaspora*  
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Jumana Bayeh's groundbreaking book offers an elegant and sophisticated analysis of several novels produced in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) and explores through them the complex relationships between place, displacement, and belonging. She challenges the limitations of conventional theories of diaspora and highlights the role that literature, when politically and historically contextualized, plays in expanding notions of home, place, and the nation-state. Ultimately, this study proposes an original and incisive exploration of Lebanese cultural and political history as well as of the global Lebanese diaspora.

Bayeh demonstrates a thorough mastery of major theories of diaspora developed since the 1990s, notably by Safran, Clifford, Stuart Hall, and Ghassan Hage, as well as of postcolonial theorists such as Said, Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, and Kristeva. Her solid grasp of the secondary literature of the novels she studies combines with a deep sensitivity to the intertextual resonances that permeate Lebanese diasporic writings: T.S. Eliot and Salman Rushdie (Chapter Two); Robert de Niro's film "The Deer Hunter" (Chapter Three); Albert Camus (Chapter Three); Khalil Gibran, the Rahbani Brothers, and Mahmoud Darwish (Chapter Five); *Arabian Nights* (Chapter Six). Not least, Bayeh displays a superb grasp of the wider Arabic poetic conventions that are also part and parcel of the Lebanese contemporary diasporic novel (the Adonis myth, the *Thousand and One Nights*, the feminization of urban spaces, the pastoral idyll, etc.). Bayeh's attentiveness to these transnational, intertextual, intercultural, and interlinguistic voices allow her to situate the novels she studies within the very specific context of pre-

and post-war Lebanon particularly with regard to the relations between Maronite/Muslim/Druze, those between Phoenicians and Arabs, or those between Palestinians and Jews. Ultimately, Bayeh's book underlines the intricate political implications of the Lebanese post-independence situation.

Bayeh's main contribution resides without any doubt in her use of literature to challenge historical and social-scientist approaches to diaspora studies. Her expertise in Arabic and Lebanese aesthetics and her impressive close-reading skills allow her to challenge established theories of diaspora especially as they relate to notions of home, roots, urban space, and nationalism. If the example of the Jewish diaspora has long served as a model in diaspora studies (Safran, Cohen), this model, Bayeh demonstrates, does not account for other diasporic experiences such as that of Lebanon where the return to a homeland became problematic because of the civil war. Her goal is thus to widen the prescriptive typology of diaspora studies and broaden the semantic field of the very category of diaspora. Her other related goal is to show how dispersed novelists, because of the geographical and temporal distance afforded by their state of diaspora, can help us reflect upon central contemporary political questions.

Bayeh's analysis of the urban space in Tony Hanania's *Unreal City* and Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* (Part I) highlights the careful effacement of all local customs and traces of the Orient. In these novels, the new architectural developments by the Solidere reconstruction projects, which aim at the commercial revitalization of Beirut represent an erasure of the Lebanese civil war, and they are a prime symbol of the state's suppression of the flow of migrants from the rural areas to the city. Literature challenges this state-led amnesia and endeavors to uncover the history of Beirut, of its Maronite community, of French colonialism in order to shed light on the contemporary postwar situation. The characters' sense of alienation in the city is thus interpreted to be not due to the abandonment of nature, of the Lebanese countryside and the mountains as many critics have argued. Rather, alienation, in Bayeh's reading, is a result of a distorted capitalism (illicit trade of drugs and of looted goods), of the continued exploitation of the peasants, of corruption, of the loss of Palestine, and of the emergence of authoritarian local regimes in post-independence and post-war Lebanon. It is precisely the disillusionment caused by these intersecting events that leads to youth radicalization and

suicide missions as a means of redemption. In this regard, literature, by offering a more complex and richer context than a simple historical retelling of conflicts and warfare could do, has important lessons for Lebanon's contemporary socio-political situation.

If conventional theories of diaspora either neglect the notion of "home" (to focus on "homeland") or assume it to be a synonym to "house," that is fixed, stable, and associated with a specific physical architectural place, Bayeh argues that in fact, in literature, it is often associated with movement and transnational mobility. The attention she gives to the very structure of the novels she examines in Part II (Nada Awar Jarrar's *Somewhere, Home*, but especially Alia Yunis's *The Night Counter*) leads her to argue that the very form and techniques of the novel, not just its themes and tropes, are an integral part of the pluralistic voice of literature which has a unique capacity to oscillate between roots and routes, fixity and movement.

As she highlights the inherent mobility of home in the characterization of place in the two Lebanese novels she examines in Part II, Bayeh once again draws the political implications of the literary text. She questions commonly accepted critical readings of the novels that consider that the very act of writing a female-focused narrative is synonymous to a feminist text, one that subverts patriarchal structures. Such facile readings of feminism, Bayeh points out, only universalize the plight of all those who are subordinate, poor, or homeless, and in the case of Nada Jarrar's novel for instance, ultimately erase the true plight of the Palestinians (138).

The last chapter of *The Literature of the Lebanese Diaspora* offers a probing example of the extent to which literature is a site of contestation of one of the central categories of diaspora studies, namely the "nation-state." If the nation-state has long been assumed to be the authentic home of a dispersed community, a culturally, and religiously homogenous national home, how can one, Bayeh asks, understand the Jewish-Arab situation in Palestine? Even though this last chapter does not focus specifically on the Lebanon, but rather on the "conflict between Jews and Palestinians prior to the partition of Palestine in 1948," Bayeh argues for the inclusion of Amin Maalouf's *Ports of Call* in her study not only because the author himself is Franco-Lebanese, but also because after all, the author applies "the destabilizing sensibility that is an inherent part of diaspora consciousness to a place that is not his immediate

homeland" (171). In this regard, and in Bayeh's eyes, *Ports of Call* very much belongs to the genre of Lebanese diaspora.

Bayeh's analysis shows how Maalouf complicates the now conventional polarity Jew-Arab, national-foreigner by arguing, after Said, Bhabha, and Kristeva, that there is no unique, or coherent culture in any nation. She points to the impossibility in Maalouf's novel, to distinguish between a political nation (a community tied racially, religiously, and linguistically) from a cultural one (based on ethnic origins, language, and religion). Only a historical manipulation of archives and of borders, only the mooring of national belonging in land ownership justifies cultural exclusivity, the myth of autochtony, and the discourse of nationalists. Maalouf's novel contest "the cultural homogeneity that is imposed on the region" (194), the ethnic and cultural separation of Jews and Arabs. It rejects the two-state solution often believed to be the only viable arrangement for Palestinians and Israelis. For Maalouf, the coexistence of the Jews and Arabs ("Levantinism") and the recognition of their common humanity are not only as possible, but they are depicted as a more successful model than the current one of separation and partition.

The reader may regret the absence of pictures to illustrate for instance pre-war and post-war Beirut and the architectural changes that are at the heart of Part I in this book and that contest the fixity of the category "place." Presses may be the ones to blame for this oversight as they are often reluctant to reproduce visual material especially in literary scholarship. One may also regret that Bayeh's critical voice does not always shine through in all the chapters (Chapters Three and Eight are notable exceptions). But these limitations are insignificant in relation to what is, unquestionably, a remarkably written and incisively-argued study which is bound to be of value and interest not only to scholars of Arab literature, but also to all those interested in diaspora studies and world literature more generally.