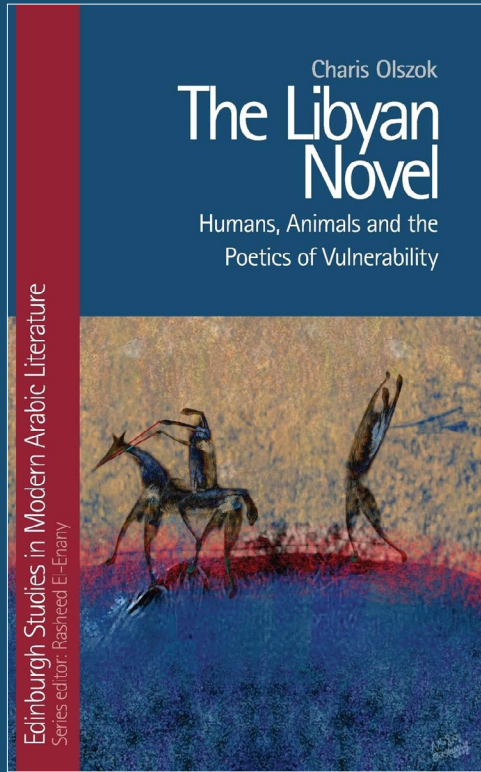


# Beyond Allegory:

Human–Animal Encounters and  
Mutual Vulnerability in the Libyan Novel

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In *The Libyan Novel: Humans, Animals and the Poetics of Vulnerability*, Charis Olszok provides an innovative exploration of the Libyan novel, situating her analysis within an integrative theoretical framework that successfully leverages critical concepts from animal studies, ecocriticism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, all the while elucidating Libya's sociopolitical realities and the ways they have shaped the poetics of modern Libyan fiction. Employing the concept of "creaturely vulnerability", which emphasizes the shared precariousness of all species, she investigates human-animal encounters and persuasively argues that in the Libyan novel, animals often feature "both as symbols of paradigmatic human political exclusion, and as embodiments of an existence beyond political demarcations" (18). As such, her nuanced analysis eschews any reductionist readings of the animal characters in the Libyan novel as sole ideological ciphers, mere national allegories, or purely literal beings. Olszok's study encompasses an ambitious corpus of novels by renowned and lesser-known authors, male and female, writing from inside Libya and the diaspora in Arabic, French, and English, spanning from the 1960s generation until 2011. The authors include but are not limited to al-Ṣādiq al-Nayhūm, Aḥmad Ibrāhīm al-Faqīh, Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī, 'Abdallāh al-Ghazāl, Maṣṣūr Būshnāf, Muḥammad al-Aṣfar, Razzan Na'im al-Maghrabi, Aḥmad Yūsuf 'Aqīla, Aḥmad al-Faytūrī, Najwā Bin Shatwān, Kamal Ben Hamida and Hisham Matar. Throughout her study, Olszok emphasizes the Libyan novel's deep rootedness in the Qur'an, popular folklore, and Sufi traditions — particularly as they reiterate the interconnection and mutual vulnerability of all human and nonhuman *makhlūqāt* [creatures]. By doing so, she elucidates the ways in which the novels engage in intertextual dialogue with other relevant texts and traditions, ensuring that her interpretation remains properly contextualized.

Employing a postcolonial, ecocritical lens, the first chapter in Part I, "Survival", highlights the "hybrid aesthetics" in al-Nayhum's *Min Makka ila Huna* (1970, *From Mecca to Here*), al-Faqīh's *Fi'ran bila Juhur* (2000; *Homeless Rats*, 2011) and al-Kūnī's *Nazif al-Hajar* (1989; *The Bleeding of the Stone*, 2002), focusing on the authors' juxtapositions

of realist narratives with fables and their depictions of individual and communal crises. In all three novels, Olszok demonstrates, animal characters allegorize the precarious lives of marginalized populations and societal and ecological violence, while also asserting their own sentience, vulnerability and, ultimately, equal right to pursue *rizq* [sustenance] and survival. Examining a handful of other novels by the same authors, Chapter 2 shifts to a more political emphasis. In this chapter, Olszok diligently excavates the primordial imagery and discourses that permeate her selected novels, showing how they construct the past as “confusion and transgression, rooted in a trajectory of exile and loss”, thereby illustrating the predicament of the “outcast intellectual” (66). Importantly, Olszok draws nuanced connections between the select Libyan novels and other non-Western and Western texts including, Ibn al-Muqaffa’s *Kalila wa-Dimna*, *The Thousand and One Nights*, pre-Islamic poetry, Tayeb Salih’s *Seasons of Migration to the North*, George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* and Franz Kafka’s “A Report for an Academy”, in addition to Biblical and Qur’anic narratives.

Titled “Signs and Cityscapes”, Part II focuses on the significance of animals and statues in the Libyan novel, demonstrating how they often signify historical (or future) trauma and violence, Sufi discourses, buried political messages, melancholic landscapes and ominous environmental degradation within and beyond Libya. In Chapter 3, Olszok provides exquisite close readings of al-Kūnī’s *al-Tibr* (1989; *Gold Dust*, 2008) and al-Ghazāl’s *al-Tabut* (2004, *The Coffin*) and *al-Khawf abqani Hayyan* (2008, *Fear Kept Me Breathing*). One of the chapter’s many strengths is Olszok’s attentive treatment of the camels that appear in *al-Tibr* and *al-Tabut*. She demonstrates how despite the variations in the camels’ statuses, and their presences and absences in the narratives, both novels echo “the transgression and disintegration embodied by the Qur’anic *nāqa* [female camel]”, as manifested through “deep-seated social and environmental imbalance” (99). Crucially, in both novels, the journeys undertaken by the male protagonists conclude “not with wealth, dominion and ideal masculinity, but failure, lack and death.” Therefore, the Sufi journey “turns to vulnerability, as the self is opened to the

universe through physical suffering, and land and creatures are animated through shared melancholy and fear” (100). In its focus on the intersection of war and violence, human–animal companionship and mystical signs, the chapter reiterates Olszok’s thesis on creaturely vulnerability as it relates to timeless spiritual Sufi discourses, as well as precarious material conditions, including political instability and the plundering of earthly resources, in modern Libya and the rest of the world.

Chapter 4 shifts its focus to the struggle and devastation of the Libyan city—often demonized by al-Qadhafi—as represented in Būshnāf’s *al-ʿIlka* (2008; *Chewing Gum*, 2014), al-Aṣfar’s *Sharmūla* (2008, *Sharmoula Salad*) and Naʿim al-Maghrabi’s *Nisaʾ al-Rih* (2010, *Women of the Wind*). The chapter explores Būshnāf’s employment of the chewing gum and human-turned-statue to explore difficult themes including economic and sociopolitical ruin, mindless consumption, censorship, and haunting stories of subjective and systemic violence in Libya. In addition, it examines al-Aṣfar’s deployment of the trope of the *sharmūla*, a local salad that evokes “unbounded hospitality” (149) and the mournful gazelle whose tours become “peppered with recent and historical suffering” (147) to explore both the oppression of the state and the potential “lines of flight”. The chapter concludes with an examination of *Nisaʾ al-Rih*, which depicts women’s struggles against both patriarchy and political oppression. While the theme of creaturely vulnerability (and solidarity) remains central to Olszok’s analysis, the novel does stand out from the other novels analysed by virtue of its largely human-centered plot and poetics.

Examining novels in Arabic, English, and French, Part III, “Children of the Land”, primarily focuses on childhood as an articulation of creaturely vulnerability, demonstrating the precariousness of transitioning from childhood to adulthood and the bumping up of childhood wonder against harsh material realities, societal pragmatism, and traumatic histories—that often do not bode well for the future of the land and its residents. In Chapter 5, for example, Olszok demonstrates how Aḥmad Yūsuf ʿAqila’s *al-Jirab: Hikayat Najʿ* (2006,

*A Sack of Village Tales*) and Ahmad al-Faytūrī's *Sarib* (2000, *A Long Story*) depict human–animal encounters, including life-changing incidents such as the slaughter of the protagonists' beloved goat and gazelle respectively, as means of depicting profound creaturely interconnection, as well as the precarity of impending adulthood. In the same chapter, Olszok provides a textual analysis of Najwā Bin Shatwān's *Wabr al-Ahsina* (2006, *The Horse's Hair*), showing how this novel, which portrays the shared suffering of mother and daughter and casts doubt on the desirability of life, further illustrates Libya's harsh sociopolitical conditions and the sense of "primordial pessimism" (190) that underlie the Libyan novel. While Olszok's analysis of this novel is certainly persuasive, the creaturely vulnerability manifested in this novel tends to center on the struggles of human or pre-human creatures (e.g. the fictionalized Adam and Eve and the unborn child), more so than those of nonhuman animals.

Chapter 6 provides a study of Kamal Ben Hamida's French-language novel, *La compagnie des Tripolitaines* (2011; *Under the Tripoli Sky*, 2013), and Hisham Matar's English-language novel, *In the Country of Men* (2006), reiterating the centrality of creaturely vulnerability, while also addressing the challenges of "linguistic exile" and the "burden of representation" (201) with which Libyan authors in the diaspora must contend. Similar to the aforementioned Arabic Libyan coming-of-age novels, Ben Hamida's and Matar's narratives, as Olszok successfully demonstrates, articulate children's harmonious connections with the natural world, as well as their subsequent dejection as they encounter present and past, personal and national, traumas that inevitably taint and transform their childhood while elucidating their families' and nation's difficult memories and histories.

*The Libyan Novel* is theoretically grounded, original, and passionate—Olszok's care for the novels she writes about, the environment, and Libya comes through in her writing. The book is as thought-provoking as it is heart-wrenching in its intimate and honest depiction of the Libyan people's suffering, human–animal companionship, and environmental degradation, as represented in modern Libyan

fiction. This is the first English-language monograph that examines the Libyan novel and that embraces an ecocritical, animal-studies approach to interpreting Arabic literature. The author's comparative perspective ascertains the Libyan novel's polyphonous, multi-layered engagement with numerous texts and worldviews across times, cultures and geographies. Olszok's timely engagement with the increasing precariousness of country and cosmos will resonate with readers and provide a valuable source for future studies on Arabic literature, postcolonial ecocriticism, and animal studies. Crucially, *The Libyan Novel* affirms that despite the scarcity of English translations and relative lack of English-language scholarly studies of modern Libyan fiction, the Libyan novel undoubtedly enriches Arabic and world literature. Olszok's book promises to diversify and invigorate theoretical fields such as postcolonialism and ecocriticism — making it even more worthy of further critical attention.