BOOK REVIEW

The Rise of Regional Creatures in Literary Animal Studies

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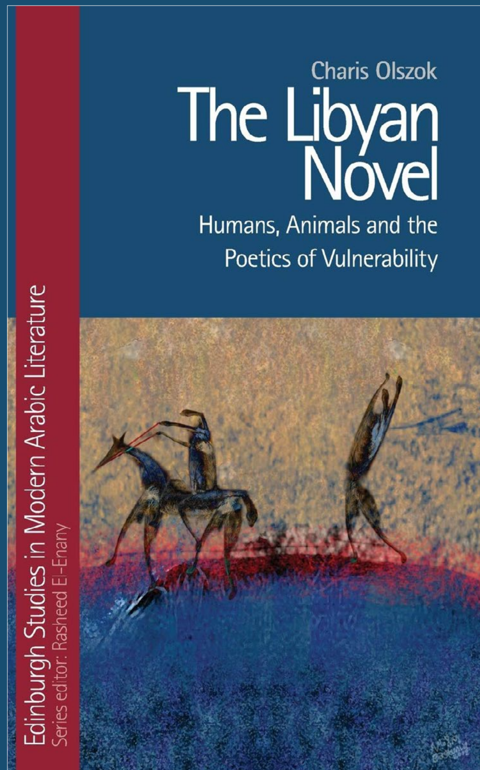

Review of:
Charis Olszok, *The Libyan Novel: Humans, Animals and the Poetics of Vulnerability.* Edinburgh Studies in Modern Arabic Literature. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. xi + 308 pp. £24.99 (pb); £75.00 (hb)

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At the crossroads of literary and animal studies, interest has been growing exponentially and shows no signs of slowing down. While preliminary groundwork has been done to identify some significant complications of concepts like "the animal" and "animality", and more recently "the creature" and "creaturely", much of the follow-through work remains to be done in clarifying how, when, and why particular peoples adapt them to literary representations of humans and other animals. Charis Olszok's *The Libyan Novel: Humans, Animals, and the Politics of Vulnerability* advances these efforts significantly, not only by explaining what makes Libyan perspectives on literary representations of creatureliness distinctive, but also by modelling how to engage important global discussions from a regional perspective.

As the first monograph in English devoted to the Libyan novel, the book additionally stands out as a major contribution to Arabic literary studies. Olszok's primary task is to explain the rise of the Libyan novel as coinciding with that of the despot Muʿammar al-Qadhafi, whose ruthless surveillance state underpinned his consolidation of power in the 1970s until his death in 2011, and terrorized the nation with a sense of "the impossibility of speaking openly of anything" (2). Throughout the twentieth century, the history of the modern Libyan state—which was ruled by genocidal Italian colonizers, then petro-extractivist British military administrators, who in turn installed the puppet Senusi Monarchy, all together leading Libya to be declared the world's poorest nation in the 1960s—is a tragedy that clearly haunts its writers. But their inability to represent the experience of living under al-Qadhafi's Jamahiriya realistically, or even directly, without fear of imprisonment, torture, and execution had a more lasting effect on their storytelling practices. Olszok thus characterizes Libyan literature as wrestling with the "difficulty of story":

> In a literary tradition where every story is problematic, both through the horror of telling it, and the danger that telling it brings, narrative becomes necessarily allusive. Stories conceal other stories, striving to express human experience in a country that has moved, within a few decades, from nomadic to

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> urban, and from colonization to dictatorship, in a nation both rentier and “rogue”, stateless and authoritarian, and, since 2014, caught in the throes of civil war. (2–3)

Many salient aspects of life for modern Libyans are spelled out for the benefit of readers who are unfamiliar with these profound and highly localized cultural changes. Moreover, developing these contexts proves crucial for demonstrating the originality and relevance of the author’s primary argument about the importance of creatureliness as a vehicle for Libyan writers to navigate the paradoxes of witnessing vulnerability while staying safe from censorship.

Rather than attempting an exhaustive study of the nation’s novelists, Olszok has instead chosen to focus on the development of a stylistic tendency toward the “non-realist, structurally fragmented and hybrid” forms that make the Libyan novel so distinctly compelling (30). What emerges is an organic explanation of the prominent, multifaceted roles of nonhuman animals in these stories: animals at once appeal to writers as politically expedient signs or symbols for articulating felt helplessness among otherwise silenced humans, while also anchoring strong material and cultural links to Saharan and Mediterranean ecologies along with ancient nomadic lifeways. More precisely, in these novels creatures with longstanding local significances like camels, jerboas, and gazelles serve as signposts, even at times direct reference points, to the many literary and cultural traditions that historically are tied to Libyan homelands.

Olszok is careful to draw connections to the various influences of Arabic, Islamic, Sufi, and other regional folklore traditions in creating sympathetic animal fictions. Attributing cultural and class bias to animal studies scholarship, one of the book’s main claims is that the story of the Libyan novel defies the presumption “that concern for ‘animal victims’ is limited to the rich West” (6). The focus on regional influences on the formal aspects peculiar to Libyan fiction works well as a corrective for bias within literary studies too. While the animal-centred fictions of Ibrahim al-Kuni — the most widely translated Arabic author today — understandably loom large throughout several chapters, Olszok deliberately counters a misperception of al-Kuni as an isolated genius, largely perpetrated in English-language

scholarship, through citations of his own extensive writing about his mutually influential, long-term relationships with other Libyan authors who share his affinity for creaturely writing.

Taking an open-ended approach to the discourse of the creaturely, the book follows a loose historical structure starting roughly in the 1950s and concluding in the 2010s. A wide array of novels are discussed comparatively, and the Introduction explains that they are grouped in chapters according to recurrent themes that are flagged by the book's three major sections. Part I, "Survival," contains a chapter each on the role of animal fables and primordial human-animality stories in advancing socio-ecological critique, which often link the existential alienation of being human to the experience of the intellectual in exile. In Part II, "Signs and Cityscapes", Olszok delves deeper into the self-reflexivity of Libyan fiction through chapters on how animal and sculptural representations operate at once as signs, symbols, and secrets. Such is the strangeness of Libyan fiction that its depictions of Neolithic rock art and modern monuments—both victims of defacement by militants during and beyond al-Qadhafi's regime—share a sense of precarity with their animal referents along with sympathetic humans, a condition that bears more immediate political implications for authorship that in turn are necessarily buried within the texts. Part III, "Children of the Land", traces a peculiarly Libyan adaptation of the *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age novel through representations of childhood as a paradigm for a stalled rather than surpassed sense of creaturely vulnerability, first through one chapter that shows how conventions of oral and folk storytelling influence this development in Libyan Arabic fiction. The next chapter explores how the arrested-development theme now shapes the stories of contemporary Libyan novelists who elect to publish first in French and English rather than Arabic, and along the way it spotlights the wider relevance of Olszok's argument about regional creaturely fictions for enriching comparative literature, world literature, and translation studies.

The Afterword brings this literary history to bear on Libya's "rapidly disintegrating present" (227), primarily by focusing on two fictional representations of the actual defacement and abrupt disappearance of Tripoli's famous Girl and Gazelle sculpture. A city landmark and central feature of a fountain in a busy urban roundabout, the large,

bronze statue disappeared in November 2014 following a series of threats and assaults inspired by the Italian-colonial provenance of the piece, and still more directly registering offense at the girl figure's nudity. Reading common elements across these stories and Libyan fiction more generally, Olszok aligns the incident and what happens in fictional retellings of it with the real-life death threats issued to Libya's millennial generation of authors. The plight of fiction writers harassed for depicting formerly taboo themes, issues, and historical perspectives—notably graphic depictions of sex—that are integral to the human experience today illustrate "how, amid the various powers vying for control of the country, oppression has become unpredictable and multifaceted, and the rules of censorship and self-censorship ill-defined" (229). Thus creatureliness persists as a "defining characteristic of Libya's literary brilliance" (231), and one that appears poised to shape literary production there for decades to come, even as its writers come to terms with concerns that cross national boundaries.

Olszok's attentiveness to the needs of audiences outside the community of Libyan writers is one of the book's strengths. Especially for non-Arabic speakers, the original translations and glosses of key passages and terms are exceptionally helpful, chief of which centres on the complexity of the term "creaturely" in this context. Whereas in English the creature connotes strangeness or monstrosity (think: *Frankenstein*), "[i]n Arabic, contrastingly, the present participle *makhlūq* conveys an abidingly powerful notion of 'createdness'" (18), emphasizing a property shared across all of creation. Scholars in literary animal studies should take note here that Olszok thereby identifies a bridge between positions predominantly characterized as oppositional in Euro-American contexts: on the one hand, that which emphasizes the vulnerability of the human as a creaturely state, which is typified by Eric Santner's *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (2006) and relies heavily on Giorgio Agamben's reading of Michel Foucault's biopolitics; and on the other hand Anat Pick's exemplary framing of the creaturely in terms of the precarity shared by humans and other animals in *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (2011), drawn primarily through the mystical philosophy of Simone Weil. Given the intertextual,

palimpsestic tendencies that Olszok abundantly identifies in Libyan fictional creatures, it seems logical to conclude that neither position has become predominant, for their "depictions of vulnerability move beyond vehicles of fixed political meaning into nuanced explorations of oppression on multiple symbolic and spiritual layers" (20).

But there is a drawback to the emphasis on parity in these different ideas about whose creatureliness matters. At times, it appears to forestall pointed discussion of how the politics of nonhuman animal rights and welfare operates in the Libyan context. Noting many disturbing depictions of people torturing and slaughtering animals — including a pattern in which a youngster responds with a lifelong aversion to meat eating, at times directly in response to witnessing traditional killings of animals at Eid — Olszok favours traditional literary methods to read such scenes strictly metaphorically, as coded critiques of state-sponsored murder. As an outsider to the culture, and one who is averse to reading animals metaphorically, I cannot help but wonder: when read literally, do the scenes that stage repulsion when faced with ritual slaughter loft critiques of all human pretenses of authority, or do they affirm that the very intention of the practice in Islam is to instill a sense of aversion to all manner of bloodshed?

In this respect, Olszok's attention to the human-historical significance in detailed close readings of scenes featuring humans, animals, and human–animal relationships comes arguably at the expense of developing the theoretical scaffolding that would demonstrate the significance of them for literary animal studies. As many have noted, what makes Pick's concept of the creaturely distinctive is the acknowledgement that nonhuman animals so often inspire people to care about shared vulnerability beyond the human fold; it is this very property that constitutes animals' distinctive contributions to storyworlds, according to David Herman's *Narratology Beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life* (2018). While Olszok's book as a whole makes a compelling case for Libyan writers having made creaturely discourse a central facet of especially Arabic fiction, the work remains of reconciling the human conditions of creatureliness with complementary arguments about what more-than-human effects the creaturely produces in literature and culture. So, for instance,

Tobias Menely's argument in *The Animal Claim: Sensibility and the Creaturely Voice* (2015) that eighteenth-century British poetic representations of nonhuman animals inspire legal turns towards protecting the vulnerable across species lines begs comparison. This last point is not so much a weakness of *The Libyan Novel* as an indicator of how the book comes to identify many opportunities that await future scholarship.

The ecological, agricultural, and other impacts of settler colonialist histories on human-animal relations are increasingly of special concern to new generations of scholars and students, who are aware as their predecessors never were before of the need for traditionally marginalized perspectives to be foregrounded in working out solutions to major social and biological crises today, whether the sudden outbreaks of zoonotic disease pandemics or the long march of anthropogenic extinction. It is intriguing to note how much of this work has begun in African literary animal studies: Olszok's *The Libyan Novel* adds to the momentum initiated by Wendy Woodward's *The Animal Gaze: Animal Subjectivities in Southern African Narratives* (2008), and more recently advanced by Jason Price's *Animals and Desire in South African Fiction: Biopolitics and the Resistance to Colonization* (2017), as well as Evan Mwangi's *The Postcolonial Animal: African Literature and Posthuman Ethics* (2019). By following their lead in looking beyond Euro-American and Anglophone canons to develop more appropriately nuanced models through comparable attention to so many more linguistic and regional traditions, literary animal studies will reach its true potentials for revolutionizing scholarship for the benefit of all.