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Lecture Abstract

Democratizing Intellectual Authority in Contemporary Arab Women's Writing

As early as the 1990s, a new generation of women writers in Syria spearheaded an investigation into the nation and the novel as male-constructed spaces. Their works embody a critical gender sensibility that meditates on the crisis of nationhood in the Arabic speaking world, both reflecting and contributing to the general atmosphere that engendered the 2011 uprising and the so-called Arab Spring. Evoking histories and sensibilities that literary, epistemological, and political authorities aim to repress or reshape, they interrogate the totalizing models of paternalism that a previous generation of intellectuals produced.

In this lecture, I focus on Rosa Yasin Hasan's 2011 metafictional novel, *First Draft*, to highlight the epistemological break with the dominant intellectual frameworks that Syrian women's literary discourse represents. I explore Hasan's quest to democratize intellectual authority by tracing her feminist rewriting of the public Arab intellectual embodied in the image of Mihyar, a central figure in Arabic literary culture, who exemplifies the fundamental principles of the cultural project of modernization that an older generation of progressive intellectuals endorsed.

To understand the literary history of this disjunction, I begin by tracing the image of Mihayar in Adonis's 1961 influential poetry collection *The Songs of Mihyar of Damascus* and Haydar Haydar's 1982 novel, *Banquet for Seaweed*. I argue that both Adonis and Haydar assume the persona of Mihyar to model their idealized version of the Arab public intellectual in their own image—a prophet-hero. In contrast, Hasan incorporates the figure of Mihyar into her novel to dismantle him entirely. In place of the all-knowing, masculinist form of selfhood that anchors Adonis's and Haydar's, Hasan's *First Draft* allows the emergence of individualized and humanized intellectuals, who are characterized by a complete loss of any grand narrative and whose realities, like the writing of fiction, are continuously in the making.

Short Biography

Linda Istanbulli is an Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at Pennsylvania State University. She holds an M.A. in Arabic literature from the American University in Cairo and a Ph.D. in Middle Eastern languages and cultures from the University of California, Berkeley. Her research centers on modern Arab(ic) literatures with an emphasis on the sorts of interventions that literary practices stage against dominant paradigms and power structures, creating the conditions of possibility for new intellectual, social, and political negotiations. She writes and publishes in both Arabic and English and her most recent work has appeared in *Journal of Arabic Literature* and *The Contemporary Levant*.