

Ageing in the Modern Arabic Novel, by Samira Aghacy. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. Pp. 186. \$120 (hardback); \$27.95 (paperback); \$27.95 (ebook).

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Until very recently, the demographic profile of most Arab societies skewed overwhelmingly youthful. At the start of the present century, in a majority of countries with significant numbers of ethnically Arab residents and/or those having Arabic as an official language, adults aged 60 and above accounted for 5 percent or less of the population. Today, however, improved life expectancy across the SWANA region coupled with declining birthrates during the past several decades means that—perhaps for the first time in history—older individuals now make up a substantial share of the inhabitants of many Arab nations; in some, adults at least 60 years of age are predicted to comprise up to a quarter of the total population by 2050 (Yount and Sibai 278–80).

Samira Aghacy’s book *Ageing in the Modern Arabic Novel* takes this seismic shift in the demographics of the Arab world as a point of departure for studying representations of old age in contemporary Arabic fiction. Over the course of the book, the reader is introduced to a diverse cast of aged literary characters drawn from sixteen novels written in Arabic and published since the 1980s (with the sole exception of Egyptian Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz’s novel *al-Sukariyyah* [*Sugar Street*], published in 1957). If the breadth and range of the corpus that Aghacy has assembled seem to bely somewhat her claim that senior citizens constitute “a forgotten segment of Arab society” seldom depicted in Arabic literary fiction (4), then as a work of scholarship *Ageing in the Modern Arabic Novel* surely fills a lacuna in its choice of topic. Alongside other recent publications in Edinburgh University Press’s Modern Arabic Literature series that mine Arabic novelistic production of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries for insights into the histories and cultures of Arab-majority countries and their diasporas, Aghacy’s book offers a fresh angle on an important issue confronting Arab societies today.

A foundational premise of *Ageing in the Modern Arabic Novel* is that the process of aging is irreducibly both biological and social, causing it to be experienced by different individuals in myriad possible ways. While there is, of course, a degree of heterogeneity in how people everywhere experience getting old, Aghacy demonstrates convincingly that the biology-society nexus produces a particularly wide array of outcomes for those who reach old age in the Arab Middle East, as the specific bodily sensations and impairments that old age incipits intersect with, and sometimes disrupt, a host of powerful pre-existing scripts governing performances of gender and sexuality, the maintenance of class hierarchies, urban versus rural lifestyles, intergenerational relationships, and so on. Thus, while some of the characters in the novels that Aghacy surveys find themselves excluded from participating fully in the public and familial spheres as they age, other characters gain newfound forms of agency in their twilight years, running households, rearing orphaned grandchildren, and entering into transgressive erotic partnerships with members of the opposite sex.

Each of the five main chapters in *Ageing in the Modern Arabic Novel* identifies a cluster of thematic concerns shared across three or four novels wherein elderly characters feature prominently. The first chapter examines a trio of novels in which grandmothers play traditional roles as dependents, caretakers, and repositories of communal memory. The second chapter focuses on novels where characters' own embodied processes of aging are mirrored in the changing urban landscapes of the cities they live in. The third and fourth chapters investigate the gender dynamics of aging in novels respectively about women who attempt to defy old age and men who are rendered cognitively and physically disabled by it. The fifth chapter discusses semi-autobiographical narratives of aging by authors who are themselves advanced in years.

To cover so much ground in a volume that runs to less than 200 pages has required Aghacy to be relatively parsimonious in how much space she allots to each novel. Perhaps for this reason, she has generally opted to save her analysis of the texts treated in each chapter for the chapter's conclusion, and to limit herself in the preceding sections of the chapter to providing detailed plot

summaries. An exception to this approach is Aghacy's discussion of Hassan Daoud's novel *Ayyām zā'idah* (*Borrowed Time*) in Chapter 4. Here Aghacy is able to show persuasively how the many disparate elements of the novel's narrative—which centers on an elderly man who has been forced to give up his business in Beirut and retire to his ancestral village by his adult children, with unhappy results—accumulate into a highly complex portrait of old age in late-twentieth-century Lebanon. As Daoud's protagonist undergoes “re-territorialisation ... within the bounds of the domestic space and the repetitiveness of life” in a rural community (114), Aghacy proposes, he is simultaneously reduced to a figure who is perceived as less than optimally male in a society that equates masculinity with economic independence, physical mobility, and the power to set one's own course in life.

Disappointingly, quotations from the Arabic novels discussed throughout *Ageing in the Modern Arabic Novel* are given solely in English translation. One of the novels examined in Chapter 1 is In'ām Kajah Jī's *al-Hafīdah al-amrīkiyyah* (*The American Granddaughter*), about a young Iraqi-American woman who is reunited with her grandmother in Mosul while employed as an interpreter for the occupying American army in 2003. In Aghacy's account of the novel, the bicultural protagonist refers to herself as a “daughter” of Iraq—as she does in the published English translation—serving as evidence for Aghacy of this character's sense of kinship with her grandmother despite their years apart (36). When one turns to the Arabic novel, however, a more complicated picture emerges, for the word used in this sentence in Arabic is not in fact *bint* or *ibnah* for “daughter” but “*salīlah*,” meaning “descendent” but also implying an infiltrator or invader through its etymological connection to the verb *tasallala* (Kajah Jī 15). My point here is not to litigate what are ultimately rather minor semantic differences between a source text and a translation, but rather to give an example of how Aghacy's interpretations could have been enriched by a return to the original Arabic text. I can only imagine what additional occurrences of such lush Arabic polysemy she might have discovered in the rest of the novels had she done so.

Despite some shortcomings, *Ageing in the Modern Arabic Novel* has much to offer anyone desiring a comprehensive overview of how old age is portrayed in contemporary Arabic fiction. Moreover, the volume's accessibility to students and instructors unfamiliar with the Arabic literary tradition make it of great potential value as a teaching resource. One can easily envision, for instance, an instructor drawing from Aghacy's assiduously curated catalog of texts to round out a class syllabus in gender studies, disability studies, or even anthropology.

WORKS CITED

Kajah Jī, In 'ām. *al-Ḥafīdah al-amrikiyyah*. Dār al-Jadīd, 2010.

Yount, Kathryn M. and Abla M. Sibai. "Demography of Aging in Arab Countries." *International Handbook of Population Aging*, ed. Peter Uhlenberg, 277–315. Springer, 2009.