Diaspora : la mémoire et l'identité
Diaspora, Memory and Identity

Serge Pouchet

"Horizons Anglophones"
SOMMAIRE

1 Introduction

2 Historique

3 Méthodes

4 Questions de théorie, histoire et mémoire

5 L’histoire, les questions de la mémoire et le corps

6 Sommaire de la conférence

7 Conclusion

8 Bibliographie

9 Annexe
'CARRYING AFRICA', BECOMING LEBANESE: DIASPORIC MIDDLENESS IN LEBANESE FICTION

Ghena Hayek
Claremont McKenna College, California

In his survey of the history of clothing, Robert Ross pithily sums up the academic debate around clothing and identity. He writes, 'there are relatively few things that can be 'said' through clothes, but they are very important things. Essentially, people use clothes to make two basic statements: first, this is the sort of person I am; and secondly, this is what I am doing' (6). In other words, as Adeline Masquelier affirms, clothing 'is part of the social skin on which identities and relations are made visible, or conversely, erased' (5). In emigrant cultures, clothing—and other aesthetic choices—often mark the individual's difference in both the receiving and home cultures. For example, Akram Khater describes how Lebanese peasants who had immigrated to the United States were easily distinguishable in American cities by their local clothing (14). And, of course, the other side of this is that when these emigrants returned to Lebanon, they wore franji, foreign, clothing and 'used their bodies to display their wealth, sophistication and social difference' (125). In other words, as with any other aesthetic choice, migration has its own specific way of marking the choice of clothing (Hage, Firth lecture, 12). Clothing, then, is a language that individuals use to embody and

1. For more on this, see Ghassan Hage's description of attending a baptism in North Lebanon in which various members of one transnational Lebanese family use clothes to distinguish one branch of the family from the other in 'The Everyday Aesthetics of the Lebanese Transnational Family' (20–22).
project specific identities to others; clothing allows one both the ability to write one’s identity and to be read (or sometimes, to be misread).  

One such example of reading occurs in Tawfiq Yusuf ‘Awwad’s Tawawin Bayrut, which has been translated into English as Death in Beirut. A man in elegant and expensive European clothing arrives in a rural and underdeveloped Lebanese village, the village of Mahdiyya in southern Lebanon. ‘Wearing his European-style hat’ and driving ‘his green Buick’ the man, who the reader quickly learns is named Jamil Mawali, ‘would come from his hotel in Beirut every day, or at least every other day’ (32). Before he made his wealth, Jamil was, as one jealous villager remembers, ‘the boy who used to go around with bare feet and patched shirt’; now, however, things are different, and ‘Jamil Mawali had come back from Africa after ten years with all this wealth and fame’ (32). The text’s mention of Mawali’s former poverty contrasted with his current wealth reinforces the claim made by scholars like Adeline Masquelier, Hildi Hendrickson, and others that, social identities and relations are made visible through clothing (5); in two brief sentences, Death in Beirut has summarized Mawali’s status in the eyes of the envious villager by describing his clothing in the past, and told the reader everything she needs to know about him, in the present: namely, that he now has money enough to buy expensive American cars and European clothing. In other words, Jamil’s body and the envious villager’s reaction to it, enact what Hildi Hendrickson has described as ‘the drama of socialization’, becoming then ‘a field for representation, which being concrete, has lasting semiotic value. Being personal, it is susceptible to individual manipulation. Being public, it has social import’ (2). Mawali’s personal choice to present himself in the clothing of a wealthy European is subject to the ways in which his fellow villagers represent him through their memories of his impoverished childhood.

Just as the text explores the idea of social identity being manipulable through a change of clothing, it also emphasizes Jamil Mawali’s physical difference from the rest of his village. When Tamima, the novel’s heroine and moral anchor, learns that Jamil Mawali, who, as a single man in possession of a good fortune, is in want of a wife—specifically, herself—she recoils:

---

1. For more on the semiotics and semiology of clothing and fashion, see Roland Barthes’ The Fashion System and Pierre Bourdieu’s Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.
Where had Jamil Mawali seen her? What did he know about her? What did she know about him? Perhaps he had seen her passing the building site. She had stolen a look or two but had not spoken a word to him. All she knew of Jamil Mawali was his wide-brimmed sun-hat and the blackness of his face—it was really black as if he was carrying Africa around on his face.

(33)

Striking as its racial directness is, the English translation nevertheless obscures the original Arabic’s stress on the color of Jamil’s face. Translated literally, the Arabic text informs us that, ‘all she knew of Jamil Mawali was his floppy hat and the color of his face, black—black, black—as if he carried Africa on his face’ (33). Notably, the hat is the same one that, a page earlier, had been described as European; the text, then, plays up the contrast between Jamil’s ‘European’ hat with his black ‘African’ face. For all his wealth, his munificence in the village—‘his projects in Mahdiyya—they were marvelous, he deserved a medal’, the text tells us immediately after describing Mawali’s repulsiveness (33)—and his stylish European clothing, all that Tamima can see—and all the text suggests is important—is the imprint that Africa has left on Jamil Mawali’s face. In the contrast between Mawali’s self-representation as a wealthy, sophisticated returned émigré and Tamima’s rejection of him on the basis of what the text marks as his ‘African’ness lies the ambivalence of Lebanese fiction towards the experience of emigration, one whose negative aspects are often figured through the depictions of Africa and of those, like Jamil, who have returned from there.

In this essay, I explore the ways in which the bodies of migrants, specifically of Lebanese men who have returned from Africa, are represented in Lebanese fiction. By focusing on the ways in which these figures are embodied textually, I seek to shed light on the ways in which Lebanese authors have engaged with certain diasporic spaces, in this case the often-undifferentiated referent ‘Africa’. As in the curious verb yahmil, to carry, used to describe Jamil Mawali’s blackness, Africa in these texts is often described as an encumbrance, a series of trials and difficulties that the Lebanese man is forced to endure because of economic necessity and hardship. As a result, the ways in which Lebanese fiction engages with the Lebanese experience in the African diaspora

1. This figuration evokes memories of the representation of Africa—and other colonial places—as the white man’s burden; given the colonial influence on Lebanon, this is perhaps understandable. See the introduction to Mudimbe’s The Invention of Africa.
reveals not only a cultural attitude towards Africa that is tangled up in notions of scientific racism, and a colonial and postcolonial anxiety about Lebanese identity and nationalism, but also, concomitantly, a gnawing anxiety over the meaning of Lebanese identity and the viability of Lebanon itself. Especially in the earlier prose fiction that is the focus of this essay, Lebanese identity is figured as a sort of between-ness; between white European identity and African identity; it is through this betweenness that the figure of the exemplary Lebanese individual emerges.

It is impossible to think of the formation of Lebanese national identity without thinking about its relation to the Lebanese diaspora. Recent work by scholars like Ghassan Hage and Akram Khater seeks to make visible the relationship between the diaspora and the homeland. In their scholarship, both Khater and Hage problematize the traditional view of emigration from Lebanon—and emigration in general—as being one-sided, affecting only those emigrants and their families. Their work—in history and anthropology, respectively—exposes the dialectic at work between the often separated concepts of diaspora and home. In his recent Firth lecture titled ‘The Everyday Aesthetics of the Lebanese Transnational Family’, as well as in some of his earlier work, Ghassan Hage takes aim at what he describes as the ‘common definition’ of diaspora, which conceives of ‘diaspora as a dispersed population united by their real or imaginary relation to an original home’, while ‘excluding that home from the diasporic space itself’ (5). Rather, Hage argues, from his work on a mountain village in Lebanon whose inhabitants have immigrated to North and South America, Europe and the Middle East, ‘just as the village as a “home” [is] present in the diaspora all over the world, the world of the diaspora [is] equally present in the village’ (5).

In the two texts I explore, the diasporic body is brought into the Lebanese village, which in turn leads to certain consequences. Written almost a century apart, both novels feature characters who have returned to Lebanese villages after many years in Africa. The first text, *Kharidat Lubnan* [The Unblemished Pearl of Lebanon] is an early example of Lebanese nationalist fiction, a serialized novella in five parts.

---

1. While the following[?] is much more geared at his fellow anthropologists, see also, for example, Hage ‘A not so multi-sited ethnography of a not-so-imagined community’.
published in 1898 in the Jesuit journal al-Machreq. Its plot revolves around a returned émigré named Hanna, who made his fortune in South Africa, and his (ultimately successful) quest to find and marry his long-lost betrothed, left behind when he emigrated twenty-five years earlier. The second novel, Death in Beirut, which I have already mentioned, is a key text of Lebanon’s post-independence, pre-civil war period. Celebrated for its alleged prescience about the impending civil war, it tells the tale of a young girl named Tamima from the Lebanese South who is finally driven by the dire social circumstances she finds herself in to join the Palestinian resistance. Africa, specifically Guinea, haunts this text in multiple ways. It is where Tamima’s father lives and where, for a substantial part of the novel, he has been falsely accused and imprisoned. The family patriarch’s prolonged absence also indirectly propels much of the plot, since it has led to the uncontrolled reign of terror of Tamima’s profligate and morally dissolute brother, Jaber, whose tyranny over the family ultimately results in several intertwined tragedies, both in Lebanon and in Africa.

From the brief summary above, it should be clear that while neither of the texts I focus on is ostensibly about Africa, Africa nevertheless haunts both of them. Like the Antigua of Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park, Africa is present in, and in fact sustains, the material lives of the two novels and of the characters who inhabit them (Said 1993: 85). For example, a scene in Death in Beirut describes the office of the local money-lender where remittances are sent to sustain wives and children left behind as being, despite its decrepit and wretched appearance, a hopeful place, where ‘there was no room . . . for anything but anticipation of the riches pouring out of Africa’ (21). In another instance, Jaber, Tamima’s brother, is identified as a big spender ‘thanks to Africa’s plenty’ (9). While such pithy statements certainly obscure the complexities underlying the Lebanese experience in Africa, as I will show, neither text hesitates to expose some aspect of the darker side of this material plenty (for example, Jaber spends all his sister’s tuition money on prostitutes), while still continuing to obscure others.

In Imagining Home Akram Khater writes that, ‘paying attention to . . . returnee narratives is important because it is a critical step toward a

1. For more on the publishing boom of the late nineteenth-century in Beirut, see Ami Ayallon’s The Press in the Modern Middle East; for more on the reading public for these early novels, see Elizabeth Hoot’s ‘Narrative and the Reading Public’.
2. For more on this prescience, see Muna Anisoun’s La Ville, source d’inspiration and Samira Aghay’s Lebanese Women’s Fiction: Urban Identity and the Tyranny of the Past.
more sophisticated and organic understanding of the making of the "modern"2; building on that, I argue that paying attention to the ways in which returnees were depicted in prose fiction—a form that has been inextricably linked with modernity and the national imaginary3—also sheds light on the making of the modern Lebanese subject (3). After all, if part of the emergence of the ‘modern’ colonial and post-colonial self rests upon distinguishing this self from what is ‘traditional’, then it enriches our understanding to try to unpack the ways in which cultures like Lebanon measured themselves against not only those cultures that were perceived to be more ‘modern’, namely the imperial European powers and the United States, but also those that were perceived to be less so, such as ‘Africa’.2 It should be kept in mind that, as Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih point out, ‘more often than not, minority subjects identify themselves in opposition to a dominant discourse rather than vis-à-vis each other and other minority groups’. But the scholars’ assertion that,

By looking at the way minority issues have been formulated in other national and regional contexts [than the center-margin axis], it is possible to show that all expressive discourses (such as music, cinema, autobiography and other literary genres) are inflected by transnational and transcolonial processes’

influences and informs this essay (2). So, in order to ‘read’ the Africa of these two texts, one must read, as Said exhorts us to do, in counterpoint, thinking about the relationships between writing about home (in Said’s example, Britain), and elsewhere as well as the dialectical relationships between both. After all, as Said points out, ‘writers [situate themselves and their work] in the larger world by using striking but careful strategies, many of them derived from expected sources—positive ideas of home, of a nation and its language, of proper order, good behavior, moral values’ (81). Read contrapuntally, the Africa that appears in Lebanese fiction is also always about Lebanon itself, the site where

1. The examples are numerous; see for example, McKeon’s Rise of the Modern Novel, or Mary Laven’s Travels of a Genre. And of course, Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities.

2. For example, as Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush point out in their introduction to the volume Prehistories of the Future, the figure of the primitive, usually African or Caribbean, ‘supplied the necessary “Other” against whose specter embattled Victorian society reinforced itself’ (2).

3. Lionnet and Shih explain the transcolonial as the traumatic counterpart to transnationalism, writing that it is, ‘the shared, though differentiated, experience of colonialism and neocolonialism (by the same colonizer or by different colonizers)’ (11).
cultural anxieties and fears over emigration, national identity, belonging, class and gender play out and are explored; even more specifically, the bodies and stories of these transnational subjects become the sites of contestations of identity and belonging.

The first Lebanese arrived in West Africa in the late 1800s, with most of the Lebanese immigration to Africa occurring between the World Wars. While there are no reliable statistics available, current estimates of the total population of Lebanese in Sub-Saharan Africa places the number at about 200,000. Compared to the 5.5 to 7 million Lebanese in Brazil, and the over one million North Americans of Lebanese origin, this number is relatively small. Significantly, for the most part, the Lebanese in Africa were what Marina Rais has described as ‘middle men minorities’ (8). This is true not only of the business positions that they held, and the sites that they worked in, but also of the position they occupied on the European imperialist racial scale. To the European colonial administrators of the nineteenth century, despite being ‘deemed backward, fallen from levels they had once attained’, as Arabs, ‘they were nonetheless considered more highly evolved than ‘Africans’ (Boddy 2005: 175).

This in-betweeness, or middle-man status is made manifest from the opening pages of Henri Lammens’ 1898 novella Kharidat Lubnān, where it is expressed—and read—through specific sartorial choices. As the story begins, an unknown stranger disembarks from a horse-drawn carriage driven by a ‘shiny black man’ in a small mountain town four hours away from Beirut (39). The man, described as al-musāfīr, the traveller, enters the village coffeehouse and sits down, at which point, the narrator launches into a physical description of the unknown traveller’s outfit:

On his head, he wore a white hat, the kind that Europeans wear in hot countries; he was also decked out in a vest and jacket made from dark felted wool, white linen trousers and boots made of grey leather. Whoever saw him could not doubt that he was an English tourist.  

(40)

1. ‘Lebanese Communities’ in Africa: An Encyclopedia for Students. See also R. Bayly Winder, ‘The Lebanese in West Africa’, which discusses some of these origin tales.
2. Not coincidentally, this is the time that immigration to the US becomes restricted, and immigration to Europe is less attractive. For more on this, see Akveampong, ‘The Lebanese in Ghana’.
4. All translations from Kharidat Lubnān are my own.
Here, the text perhaps veers into a sly, tongue-in-cheek humor, contrasting the extreme heat of the weather that requires the shiny black coach driver to water his horses before being able to turn away from the village with the woolen clothing the man wears, as well as emphasizing the distinction between the heat-appropriate hat and linen trousers and the woolen jacket and waistcoat more appropriate for colder climates. The text seems to slyly suggest that, as with most English tourists, the wandering stranger does not know how to dress appropriately for the Lebanese climate.

Over the course of the next few pages, the reader learns—along with the owner of the coffee shop—that the man in question is not an ‘English tourist’, but rather a son of the village, returned after a twenty-five year absence into the ‘unknown parts of South Africa’, ‘majāhil ifriqiya al-janūbiyya’ (41). It is precisely at this point that the gentleman becomes of interest to the coffee shop owner as well as to the reading public: this man, after all, is not one of ‘those English tourists who roam in the coolness of [Mount] Lebanon during the summer’, albeit, as the paragraph above suggests, dressed inappropriately for the mild Mediterranean climate, but a prodigal son returned to his ancestral village who has been aged and discombobulated by the experience of being away. As the realization that the man is not a stranger dawns on the coffee shop owner, the ‘English tourist’ transforms from being the ghurib—stranger, but also strange one—to being Hanna, the brave but impeccable young man who had left the village years earlier to seek his fortune elsewhere. And, even at this early juncture in the text, the evidence of Hanna’s fortune is registered through his external appearance, the elegant and expensive European/English clothes that he is dressed in, in stark contrast to the local jellabiya which one of the villagers wears, and whose edge he uses to wipe his face (42).

However, unlike the roaming European men of leisure the text compares him to, and reminiscent of Jamil Mawali, Hanna has had an experience that has marked his body in immutable ways that contrast with the leisurely elegance of his clothes. The text informs us that ‘he was tall, and about fifty years old. While the casual viewer may have placed him at 60, his energy, sparkling eyes and smile showed that his heart was younger than his face . . . but the whiteness of his hair and the wrinkles on his face spoke of unspeakable hardships that he had seen in his youth, which had led to him being old before his prime’ (42). A few pages later, the text repeats that ‘a premature aging’ has been caused by the ‘torments and trials and hardships’, ‘akdar wa-l-mashāq’,
that Hanna has endured in South Africa (44). The text plays up the incongruity between the man’s energy and disposition and his outward appearance, and emphasizes the fact that the man’s life experiences have aged him prematurely and drastically. Africa, then, becomes a site that literally transfigures and transforms the Lebanese body by aging it beyond its years. Unlike Jamil Mawali, Hanna has not been ‘blackened’ by Africa; however, his body has not escaped its nefarious effects and he has become an old man before his time. Notably, this premature aging is caused by the psychological burdens that Hanna has borne due to his time in Africa.

The text contrasts Hanna’s haggard outward physical appearance and the villagers’ memories of the young Hanna’s vigor and physical strength in addition to contrasting Hanna’s depiction of his life in exile and his life in Lebanon.

O, how miserable life in exile is! A man must give up some of his freedom and rent himself out to others, bowing his head and bending his back under heavy loads, standing begging at doors and stacking humiliations upon himself while he exposes his soul to all sorts of fears and dangers. I would not go back to that state even if I had all of Croesus’ money. Had God’s hand not been held out to me, and the light of hope not have nourished me, I would have died of exhaustion or by my own hand. I often prayed to God to send me to my country (bīlādī) even if all I could eat was bread and olives. I would be happy in my poverty, and living free in Lebanon’s beautiful mountains under its glorious sky. (329)

It is noteworthy that the misery of exile in Africa is characterized, for Hanna, as one during which his freedom is curtailed, and his life is one of servitude. By the paragraph’s end, this is clearly contrasted with Mount Lebanon, where even the poor are free. It is particularly noteworthy because this lack of freedom is meant as a sign of Hanna’s abject misery in exile, and the worst possible fate—worse even than poverty, after all; yet, the text’s extreme descriptions of the misery of Hanna’s lack of freedom and the suicidal despondency that may have ensued from it simultaneously reveals and obscures, by textually downplaying, the exploitative colonial practices of the European mining companies against the African natives, who are frequently, and unproblematically (for the text) described as ʿābīd, slaves. The text nonchalantly describes how Hanna got his job as a mining supervisor, ‘the ʿābīd, the natives, are apparently not allowed to own land, and are only allowed to work in mines as laborers. They do not earn wages, and all the agents must
be white, including the mine supervisors because the slave-laborers will do their best to steal gold and diamonds otherwise' (282). To a contemporary reader, the appositive 'natives'—in the Arabic, 'ahl tilka al-bilād', the folk of those countries—as a descriptor of 'slaves' is striking for the textual equivalency it creates between these two states, and the suggestion that all the natives are, essentially, slaves. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said writes that the 'positive ideas' about the nation produced by these comparative fictions such as *Kharidat Lubnan* 'do more than validate 'our world'. They also tend to devalue other worlds, and perhaps more significantly from a retrospective point of view, they do not prevent or inhibit or give resistance to horrendously unattractive imperialist practices' (81). Such depictions serve not only to compare Lebanon favorably to the Transvaal, but also unthinkingly re-produce in their very language some of the 'horrendously unattractive imperialist practices' Said describes.

In depicting the struggle and hardship of Hanna's life so dramatically, *Kharidat Lubnan* nonchalantly obscures, and then textually replicates and repeats, through the framing device of multiple narratives, some of the more egregious facts of life in colonial South Africa. The novella uses three distinct narrative voices to tell Hanna's story. The first is an omniscient narrator, whose voice dominates the bulk of the novella. The second narrative voice belongs to the coffeeshop owner who initially fails to recognize Hanna as a fellow villager; he tells Hanna's story to two young men visiting the village from Beirut. Finally, the third narrative voice is Hanna's, as he takes over the telling of his story from the coffeeshop owner, to the same two young men. Within the narrative logic, only Hanna has had any direct personal experience with life outside Lebanon; however, the three narratives together work to replicate and repeat certain stereotypical discourses. As Homi Bhabha points out in *The Location of Culture*, it is precisely ambivalence towards stereotyping and the ready perpetuation of stereotypes that is 'one of the most significant discursive and psychological strategies of discriminatory power' (95). Bhabha suggests that, as readers and critics, our role 'should shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the processes of signification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse' (95). One such discourse embedded into the subtext of *Kharidat Lubnan* is the European colonial discourse of scientific racism, which seeped into everyday life through advertisements, novels, travel books, and broadsheets, thereby contributing to dispositions in civil society.
Such a dialectic between pedagogues and the populace is, in Gramsci’s view, essential to successful hegemony, the socially produced assumptions about the world that, having become naturalized, go unquestioned and serve to effect and regulate social relations. The scientific mystique that cloaked ideas of race and class presented them as ‘objective’ and morally neutral—empirical facts of life. Popular media normalized such views by reflecting them as only so much common sense.

(Boddy 2005: 175)

This hierarchy, and the ways in which, like so much of nineteenth century scientific racism, it was taken absolutely for granted by the producers and consumers of knowledge not only in Europe, but also in the Ottoman Middle East, is embodied in the ways in which Kharidat Lubnan describes Hanna. The first indication of this is in the text’s assured tone in ascribing Hanna’s racial identity. Because ‘white men are in short supply over there’ in South Africa, he quickly finds lucrative work as a mechanic, fixing weapons for the Boers, then he becomes a mine supervisor, subsequently becoming extremely wealthy through his hard work because he pleased both those he served, ‘makhdimi’, and gained the love of the slaves who worked under him. Despite Hanna’s alleged whiteness, however, the text quickly problematizes his racial and social status vis-à-vis the Europeans, and just as quickly reasserts a hierarchy of power through its use of the term ‘makhdim’. ‘Makhdim’ emphasizes the relationship of servitude, since it derives from the root kh-d-n, to serve. Its signified subject, furthermore, are the European mine-owners; in short, the term does not ascribe subjectivity to Hanna, but rather posits him in relationship to the colonial power as its servant.

As the text draws out its implicit distinctions between the European colonists and the Lebanese Hanna, it also etymologically emphasizes the distinction between Hanna and the Africans he supervises, thereby highlighting and accentuating his intermediary position on the scale of civilizational progress and development. The text contrasts Hanna, who is, as the text has previously suggested ‘white’,¹ and the Africans who work under him through a scale of descriptors of servitude and work compensation. In Kharidat Lubnan, as I have already mentioned, Hanna is described as supervising ‘abid’, slaves.² The text continues

¹. Guita Hourani has written about the ultimately successful legal struggle of the Lebanese communities of South Africa to be legally classified as white; for more on this, see, ‘The Struggle of the Christian Lebanese for Land Ownership in South Africa’.
². Eve Troult Powell describes the use of this term in contemporary Egypt in Tell This in my Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt, Sudan and the Ottoman Empire.
matter-of-factly to describe ‘those from those countries, [i.e., the natives] are apparently not allowed to own land, and are only allowed to work in the mines and do not earn their wages in gold coin’ (282). That the speaker of these words is the coffeeshop owner in Hanna’s village who has never left Mount Lebanon emphasizes both the facile reproducibility and also the nonchalant acceptance of these racialized hierarchies. With the use of yābdū anna—‘it appears that’—the text is signaling two things to its readers simultaneously: one, that this is an acquired fact, received from another source; but, two, that it is repeating—reproducing—this factual narrative. In short, the innkeeper, in repeating Hanna’s story to the two young men visiting from outside—who, as it turns out, are journalists, thus ensuring the further perpetuation of the narrative logic—is participating in the production of a certain kind of narrative about Africa, and of Africans. Kharidat Lubnan’s ambivalence towards Africa and Africans is demonstrated in the ease of disseminated discourses about them. In writing about the narratives embedded into such texts as the Arabian Nights, Tzvetan Todorov muses that the effect of the multiply-entwined narratives is to simultaneously efface the origin story and to give the impression of perpetuity. He writes that ‘we are beyond the origin and unable to conceive of it. The supplied narrative is no more original than the supplying narrative, or vice versa. Each narrative refers us to another, in a series of reflections which can end only by becoming perpetual’ (78).

The three narratives embedded into Kharidat Lubnan seemingly serve this function as well, effacing both the conditions or reasons for emigration from Lebanon as well as the complex social processes whereby the Lebanese in Africa became these middle men while at the same time endlessly reproducing stereotypes about Africa and Africans. The alleged objectivity of these narratives becomes highlighted with every instance of narrative repetition.

Through narrative repetition and the seemingly effortless reproducibility of racial stereotypes, Kharidat Lubnan produces the exemplary Lebanese man as neither African nor European; significantly, though, given al-Machreq’s Jesuit outlook, mission, and possibly, its readership as well, the exemplary Lebanese man is Christian. It is in this intermediary status that Kharidat Lubnan constructs Hanna’s identity as a

---

She points out that there is a reluctance to even acknowledge that the term is used to describe ‘darker-skilled people of African descent’; this silence, she suggests, ‘reflects a larger silence about the legacy of slavery’ in North Africa (3).
Lebanese man by performing a complex racial dance which emphasizes the fluidity of these racial categories, and the easy fluctuation between seemingly opposing racial poles. For example, the text tells its readership that, in Africa, Hanna is white, but clearly not European; significantly, this positioning on the racial scale spares his life when the African workers revolt against their European masters. And, despite his dapper appearance upon his return, once in Lebanon, Hanna is also significantly non-European in other ways. For example, the coffeeshop owner tells his two young visitors that Hanna, ‘unlike those who return, has only brought back the best of European customs with him; he fulfills his religious duty, attends mass regularly and prays as fervently as if he had never left our village’ (283). In this sentence lies the suggestion that the ‘real’ Lebanese are different from the Europeans and European-influenced migrants because of their devotion to Christian rites and rituals, and of course to the church. In fact, it is the pealing bells of the church, described as *kanisat al-watan*, the church of the nation, that brings Hanna back into the fold of the village, and finally leads him to his beloved Anissa.

The coffeeshop owner’s narration of Hanna’s distinction from other returnees also highlights some of the other concerns about those who returned from abroad. Not only, as the above paragraph implicitly suggests, was there the fear that these émigrés had lost their connection to their religious faith, but, as Akram Khater describes in his work, the Beirut intelligentsia, and especially *al-Machreq*, also took an active interest in how these returnees invested their money; in *Kharidat Lubnān*, Hanna, like Jamil Mawali earlier in this essay, is presented as a village benefactor, and specifically, one whose philanthropy and social awareness distinguishes him from other returnees (142).³ Gratefully describing Hanna’s munificence to the two young journalists visiting the village, the coffeeshop owner tells his listeners that, unlike

those returnees who only care about themselves and buy land and build fancy houses, Hanna has done what we will never forget. You must have seen the foundations at the beginning of the village; he is building a hospital there, with a home for the elderly. And he wants to build a school for boys and a school for girls.

(283)

Through the story of Hanna and his wealth, *Kharidat Lubnān* builds a prescriptive narrative of the exemplary returnee, one who uses his

---

³ Khater writes that the journal lamented the fact that ‘émigrants . . . were investing in land . . . rather than in projects with higher returns’ (142).
millions for the betterment of his village and town, and for the social
good. His ability and readiness to do so redeem Hanna’s experiences
in the village. Unable to have children because of his advanced age, he
becomes the village patriarch, using his African wealth to do good in
his nation, (then-Ottoman) Lebanon.

It is the relationship between two peripheral spaces, Lebanon and
Africa; the transnational imaginary developed in Lebanon about Africa;
and, in particular, what ‘Africa’ came to mean to the formation of
Lebanese identity that are at the heart of the questions asked in this
brief essay. By closely examining an early example of modern prose
fiction, I have shown how Africa as a place and a foil emerged early on
in the development of the modern Arabic prose novel, and how some
of the portrayals of race, difference, and national identity remained
uncannily similar over time. In the longer project of which this essay
forms a part, I hope to trace the slowly rigidifying racial tropes sur-
rounding Africa and Africans, and to problematize them. For now, it is
worth noting that, for all its conservatism, Kharidat Lubman nevertheless
figures Hanna’s racial identity as fluid and dynamic. Meanwhile, Death
in Beirut, for all that it is heralded as a groundbreaking text, can only
represent Jamil Mawali through the language of racial othering; the
text affixes him into his ‘black black blackness,’ and cannot see him any
other way. Death in Beirut can only see Africa itself and the African
emigrant as tragic figures, even when the emigrant returns to do good
in his Lebanese village. Exploring this tension between the Lebanese
condition and the African diaspora is only one of many future avenues
that taking a closer, more analytic look at Africa in Lebanese fiction
will enable us to pursue.

Works Cited

AGHACY, Samira. ‘Lebanese Women’s Fiction: Urban Identity and the
Tyranny of the Past.’ International Journal of Middle East Studies

AKYEMFONG, Emmanuel. ‘Race, Identity and Citizenship in Black
Africa: The Case of the Lebanese in Ghana’. Africa: Journal of

AMYUNI, Mona. La ville, source d’inspiration : le Caire, Khartoum, Beyrouth,
Paola Scala chez quelques écrivains Arabes contemporains. Beiruter


