

The Arabic Novel

الرواية العربية

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She is free to do what she wants, and free not to do it.

Woman at Point Zero by Nawal El Saadawi

Prose came before poetry. In the beginning, there was prose.

The Tongue of Adam by Abdelfattah Kilito

He who has missed out on translation knows not what travail is:

None but the warrior is scorched by the fire of war!

I find a thousand notion for which there is none akin

Among us, and a thousand with none appropriate;

And a thousand terms with no equivalent.

I find disjunction for junction, though junction is needed.

Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq

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Overview

Whether seen as a chronicle of social life, a hothouse of ideas and philosophical contemplation, a space for literary invention and the articulation of the quiet as well as the loud moments of existence, the novel is, in its various shapes and forms, a modern phenomenon. Perhaps this is partly why for long time there persisted, both in the minds of some Western and Arabic readers, the notion that the genre is a European invention, and therefore, the Arabic novel in particular, an act of literary mimicry. This is not only erroneous, but it also misses what is actually fascinating about the story of the novel in Arabic.

It is a story that tells of a deep engagement with a great literary tradition as well as a commitment to invention. There are strong preoccupations with notions of freedom, political as well as personal, and instances of translation or conversion. From the Quran to medieval prose pioneers such as the ninth century author Al-Jahiz, from *The 1001 Nights* (*The Arabian Nights*) to the nineteenth and early twentieth century pioneers of The New Age (al-asr al-jadid) responsible for the literary modernity that later came to be known as al-Nahda ('the revival'), and later still, from the social documentary novels of Naguib Mahfouz and Nawal El Saadawi, to the novels of transgression and cultural bewilderment, of colonialism and occupation; throughout all this, the Arabic novel has been a space of curiosity, exploring ways of telling and of rebellion, or remembrance and invention.

The novel in Arabic literature has often been the place where every attempt to look within ends up involving the need to contend with or measure the self against the European, the dominant culture. This took various forms. From early moments of easy-going and confident cosmopolitan travellers, such as Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaaq, to later author, such as Tayeb Salih, mapping the existential fault lines between west and east. For this reason, and as well as being a modern phenomenon, the Arabic novel has also been a tool for translation, for bridging gaps

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and exposing what al-Shidyaq—the man credited with being the father of the modern Arabic novel, and himself a great translator—called ‘disjunction’.

We will begin with his satirical, deeply inventive and erudite novel, published in 1855, *Leg Over Leg*. It is a book with an insatiable appetite for definitions and comparisons, with words that had been lost or fell out of use (the author had an abiding interest in dictionaries that anticipates Jorge Louis Borges) and with locating and often subverting moments of connection and disconnection. We will then follow along a trajectory to the present, where we will read, in English translation, novels written in Arabic, from Egypt, Syria, Sudan, Morocco and Palestine. We will read them chronologically, starting with *Leg Over Leg* (1855) and finishing with *Minor Detail*, a novel that was only published last year.

Obviously, this does not claim to be a comprehensive survey; for that we would need several years and even then, we would fall short. Instead, the hope is that it will be a thrilling journey through some of the most fascinating fiction ever written.

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Structure

This will be a seminar class and therefore focused on discussion where student contribution is encouraged. Every week you will be assigned reading material. The **Schedule** below has the approximate number of pages to be read each week. Please consult the **Required Texts** list below for titles that need to be purchased. Strong emphasis is placed on close reading.

For the first five weeks, students will be required to write a short (300 to 500 words) response to each week's reading. Following from that, every week two students will give a short presentation, responding to the work read that week. These are to be no shorter than 5 minutes and no longer than 7 minutes and will be judged on how effectively they highlight the themes and characteristics of the work in focus that week. A handout of the presentation, which could include printout and/or bullet points of the presentation, plus any illustration material if applicable, will be required on the day of the presentation.

Furthermore, three papers will be required. Papers one and two (between 1150 and 1250 words each) must be delivered in class in hard copy (Covid permitting) as well as by email on the assigned dates (see schedule below), and paper three (between 1300 and 1500 words) will be submitted by email alone on the designated date (please refer to schedule). Essays should be intelligently argued, exhibit original thought and be well written. Essay topics will be given.

All written material, whether in hardcopy or email attachment, is to be in the following format: Word doc., Times font size 14 and double-spaced. Each sheet of paper is to have on the top the title, your name and the date. Please also make sure to number your pages.

Overall assessment will take into consideration the following: weekly presentations (10%); in-class participation (10%); paper one (25%); paper two (25%); and paper three (30%). Paper extensions are rare, and can only be given in exceptional circumstances and with advanced notification and explanation in person; emails, notes or voicemail messages do not count.

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Otherwise, late papers will be penalized one notch per day: A- to B+ and so on. No revisions accepted—for a changed grade—once paper has been handed in.

Schedule

PART I:

WEEK 1:

- Introduction and explanation of syllabus.
- Reading assignment for next week: *The Tongue of Adam*

Total Reading: 70 pages approximately.

WEEK 2:

- Discussion of *The Tongue of Adam*.
- Reading assignment for next week: *Leg Over Leg* (part 1)

Total Reading: 150 pages approximately.

WEEK 3:

- Discussion of *Leg Over Leg* (part 1)
- Reading assignment for next week: *Leg Over Leg* (part 2)

Total Reading: 150 pages approximately.

WEEK 4:

- Discussion of *Leg Over Leg* (part 2) and any questions concerning paper one.
- Reading assignment for next week: *Leg Over Leg* (part 3)

Total Reading: 150 pages.

PAPER ONE ASSIGNMENT HANDED OUT (1150 to 1250 words)

PART II:

Week 5:

- Discussion of *Leg Over Leg* (part 3)

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- Reading assignment for next week: *Palace Walk* (part 1)

Total Reading: 150 pages approximately.

Week 6:

- Discussion of *Palace Walk* (part 1)
- Reading assignment for next week: *Palace Walk* (part 2)

Total Reading: 150 pages approximately.

PAPER ONE DUE DATE – DELIVER BY HARD COPY IN CLASS AS WELL AS BY EMAILED

WEEK 7:

- Discussion of *Palace Walk* (part 2).
- Reading assignment for next week: *Palace Walk* (part 3).

Total Reading: 150 pages approximately.

WEEK 8:

- Discussion of *Palace Walk* (part 2).
- Reading assignment for next week: *Season of Migration to the North*

Total Reading: 200 pages approximately.

PAPER TWO ASSIGNMENT HANDED OUT (1150 to 1250 words)

WEEK 9:

ACADEMIC HOLIDAY

PART III:

WEEK 10:

- Discussion of *Season of Migration to the North*
- Reading assignment for next week: *Woman at Point Zero*

Total Reading: 150 pages approximately.

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WEEK 11:

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- Discussion of *Woman at Point Zero*
- Reading assignment for next week: *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* (part 1)
- *Total Reading: 150 pages approximately.*
- WEEK 12:
- Discussion of *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* (part 1)
- Reading assignment for next week: *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* (part 2)
- *Total Reading: 150 pages approximately.*

WEEK 13:

- Discussion of *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* (part 2)
- Reading assignment for next week: *Minor Detail*
- *Total Reading: 150 pages approximately.*

PAPER THREE ASSIGNMENT HANDED OUT (1300 to 1500 words)

WEEK 14: LAST DAY OF CLASSES

- Discussion of *Minor Detail* and any questions concerning final paper.

FINAL PAPER DUE DATE – DELIVER BY EMAILED

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Required Texts

- *The Tongue of Adam*, by Abdelfattah Kilito, trans. Robyn Creswell, ISBN-13: 978-0811224932
- *Leg over Leg: Volumes One and Two: 1 (Library of Arabic Literature)*, by Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, trans. Humphrey Davies, ISBN-13: 978-1479800728
- *Leg over Leg: Volumes Three and Four: 2 (Library of Arabic Literature)*, by Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, trans. Humphrey Davies, ISBN-13: 978-1479813292
- *The Cairo Trilogy*, by Naguib Mahfouz, ISBN-13: 978-0375413315
- *Season of Migration to the North*, by Tayeb Salih, tras. Denys Johnson-Davies, ISBN-13: 978-1590173022
- *Woman at Point Zero*, by Nawal El Saadawi, trans. Sherif Hetata, ISBN-13: 978-1783605941
- *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet*, by Ulfat Idilbi, trans. Peter Clark, ISBN-13: 978-1566562546
- *Minor Detail*, by Adania Shibli, trans. Elisabeth Jaquette, ISBN-13: 978-0811229074

Recommended Texts

- *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1,001 Nights: Volume 1-2*, edited by Robert Irwin.
- *The Author and His Doubles: Essays on Classical Arabic Culture*, Abdelfattah Kilito
- *Stranger Fictions: A History of the Novel in Arabic Translation*, by Rebecca C. Johnson
- *The Days*, by Taha Hussien

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Office Hours

By appointment: you will need to write your name and preferred timeslot on the schedule on my office door.

Criteria for Assessment of Written Material

- Exhibiting the ability to read comparatively: comparing and contrasting two different texts; finding common ground between them as well as distinctions; making juxtapositions that might help clarify and explain elements in each text.
- The quality of the writing: the clarity and precision of the sentences; the way each paragraph advances the overall thesis.
- The rigour and elegance of the argument: the clarity and authenticity with which the student allows her intellect to question and enquire; the logical construction of the observations; and the thorough analysis of assertions and conclusions.
- Originality of thought: it is imperative that the student demonstrates evidence of independent thinking.

Learning Outcomes

- Demonstrate knowledge of the structure, narrative characteristics and themes of *The Arabian Nights*
- Exhibit evidence of comprehending and drawing out common literary as well as historical threads between *The Arabian Nights* and later works.
- Comparing and contrasting different cultural modes of narrative interpretation and responses.

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- Write clear essays that succeed in analyzing key concepts and issues in assigned readings as well as develop a clear and persuasive argument supported by textual evidence.

The Honor Code:

We, the students of Barnard College, resolve to uphold the honor of the College by engaging with integrity in all of our academic pursuits. We affirm that academic integrity is the honorable creation and presentation of our own work. We acknowledge that it is our responsibility to seek clarification of proper forms of collaboration and use of academic resources in all assignments or exams. We consider academic integrity to include the proper use and care for all print, electronic, or other academic resources. We will respect the rights of others to engage in pursuit of learning in order to uphold our commitment to honor. We pledge to do all that is in our power to create a spirit of honesty and honor for its own sake.

Wellness Statement

It is important for undergraduates to recognize and identify the different pressures, burdens, and stressors you may be facing, whether personal, emotional, physical, financial, mental, or academic. We as a community urge you to make yourself--your own health, sanity, and wellness--your priority throughout this term and your career here. Sleep, exercise, and eating well can all be a part of a healthy regimen to cope with stress. Resources exist to support you in several sectors of your life, and we encourage you to make use of them. Should you have any questions about navigating these resources, please visit these sites:

<http://barnard.edu/primarycare>

<http://barnard.edu/counseling>

<http://barnard.edu/wellwoman/about>

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Academic Accommodations

"If you are a student with a documented disability and require academic accommodations in this course, you must register with the Office of Disability Services (ODS) for assistance. Students requesting accommodations will need to first meet with an ODS staff member. Once registered, students are required to request accommodation letters each semester to notify faculty. Accommodations are not retroactive, so it is best to contact ODS early each semester to access your accommodations. If you are registered with ODS, please see me to schedule a meeting outside of class in which you can bring me your faculty notification letter and we can discuss your accommodations for this course. Students are not eligible to use their accommodations in this course until they have met with me. ODS is located in Milbank Hall, Room 009/008."