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Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. 189 pp. ISBN 0691050988.

Reviewed by Imed Labidi, University of Minnesota

In *Writing Outside the Nation*, Azade Seyhan studies the diasporic narratives of contemporary migrant writers whose languages, lives, and experiences have been altered by the paradigms of bilingualism, the ambiguity of biculturalism and the rupture of geographic dislocation. In an effort to confront the ennui of losing the *Heimat* (homeland), these narratives experiment with new modes of articulating "their linguistic and cultural heritage through acts of personal and collective memory" (12). In both fictional and autobiographical works, the writers turn the plight of loss into an inspiration for literary production. Meticulously, Seyhan explains how the literature of diaspora, as an institution of cultural memory, records their confrontation with a double marginalization by both native and host cultures that negate their belonging to either location. Readers who are new to theory can benefit from Seyhan's remarkable expressiveness and ability to explain in simple terms and in a sophisticated style complex theoretical concepts. Covering issues emerging from different spaces, languages, and cultural interaction in exile, she discusses the theories of history and representation, the dialectic of otherness, and the possibilities for reconciling the binarisms between the West and the rest. As for theoretical practitioners and experts, they can discover some of the most accomplished diasporic authors whose literature enabled them to penetrate the boundaries separating cultures, languages, and nations and to celebrate their hybridity without the need of a particular space.

Not until they are rooted in ideas of an imagined community rather than geographic locations or "subalterns" in the Western system of binaries of the self and the Other do these authors become cultural visionaries. Their questionable cultural heritages, the volatile spaces in which they live, plus their hyphenated existences with all their antinomies, make them face a double challenge: the first is to trespass into the center of the dominant host language and its culture; and the second is to bring their own backgrounds, languages and idioms into this new cultural sphere. Haunted by their fragmented selves and their deterritorialized literature, and eager to come to terms with this dividedness (what I mean here is understanding this condition, accepting it, explaining it to others) they resort to the act of narration as an expression of their hybridity. In their poetics, *Bildungsromane*, and (auto) biographies, they clearly engage in a demand for recognition from both the native and the host. At the same time, this expression represents an act of self-preservation capable of bringing together, in a coherent and meaningful reformulation, the missing pieces within their memories. Seyhan is particularly interested in these narratives, which "record what history and public memory often forget" (12).

Time and again, "postcolonial" inquiries have been concerned with retrieving the missing parts of memory, exposing the violent circumstances of their erasure, and citing voices that have been forced into exile. This study, however, discusses an ostensibly less violent crisis—voluntary migration. Skillfully, Seyhan combines the study of the history of migration and the appalling conditions at border-crossings with a critique of the theories of representation. Moreover, she examines how collective cultural memories become a process to awaken the dead for a new reading of history. Thus, these memories enable us to investigate the past and to explore new forms of engagement for a better understanding of multiculturalism.

The study is divided into two main parts and includes five chapters. The analysis of part one, especially the first three chapters, explains the literary text in the light of theory and philosophy. For this purpose, Seyhan presents a cross-disciplinary framework, engaging the insights of Walter Benjamin, Deleuze and Guattari, Edward Said, Freud and Hans-Georg Gadamer, among others, to read the new transnational narratives. More precisely, the study raises significant questions concerning future inquiries about the "post" colonial theme of translanguaging narratives within which migrants use their acquired language—that is of the center—to decentralize Western-based readings. (In my reading of Seyhan's book, the "post" should neither imply that colonialism ended and is now a matter of the past nor claim that using the language of the center to agitate the center remains the signifier of this postcolonial era.) Seyhan gives equal attention to the issues of globalization and migration whose investigation helps us understand "the transitions and the transformations at the shifting borders of history, politics and culture" (29).

Although Seyhan's study focuses on the status and conditions of two major minorities—Chicano/a in the United States and Turks in Germany—the discussion includes other diasporic writers from the Arab world and the Caribbean. Studying so many talented writers such as Edwidge Danticat, Rosario Ferré, Oscar Hijuelo, Rafik Schami, Ana Castillo and Emine Sevgi Özdamar, certainly fosters Seyhan's analysis and her calls for: (a) the need to question the unilateral movement of assimilation from the margin toward the center; (b) the necessity to acknowledge the presence of the "Other" and to recognize the plurality of experience, which allows for equal participation and multiplicity of dialogue. Hence, assimilation becomes based on awareness of the Others' active participation as historical subjects rather than an attempt to reinforce the universality of the West. Mostly subversive of the sanctioned version of the past, these multiple voices, from their location of dislocation, contemplate their position of "in-betweenness." In this respect, the language (in this case non-indigenous) is transformed within these narratives into an empowering motif which obliterates the evolutionary views of the dominant history and disrupts the conventionality of the native culture.

Chapter One, "Neither Here/ Nor There: The Culture of Exile," reflects on the rupture of experience in modernity, the pitfalls of monolingualism, and the interaction between cultures. This chapter lays out the theoretical strategies for reading modern diasporic literature as a reservoir of cultural history of the "Other" in order to establish significant links between language, memory and imagination. Without dismissing the factors which may interfere with the past, like political coercion, manipulations of national demands, and censorship, Seyhan argues that the accuracy of history is to be worked out through the collision between official and popular histories and the interaction of cultures. In this context, culture becomes a collectively constructed linguistic and cultural global capital; its completion depends on multiple contributions.

Chapter Two, "Geographies of Memory," comprises two sections. The first entertains questions about the constitutive elements and purposes of "minor literature." The second reveals the distinction between history and memory, their methods of validation, and some instances of their collision. The argument that follows persuasively contends that history is neither teleological nor linear, and its claim to be scientific is questionable at best. Whether it is viewed as circular or progressive, Seyhan argues, history omits unwanted events so as not to disrupt its coherence.

Therefore, memory as the realm of art and literature is the domain where those events can be retrieved.

Chapter Three, "Autobiographical Voices with an Accent," studies the process of transferring autobiographies (personal, fictional, and cultural) from personal accounts of events to the realm of memory by locating connecting points between ancestral and family history and the past in general. In the context of reproducing the family's history, (auto)biographies are critically rewriting new versions of their communities' old stories and creating debates from within about memory's discontent. As Seyhan's reading suggests, Maxine Hong Kingston in her (auto)biography, *The Woman Warrior*, presents her own reading of the Fa Mu Lan myth to voice her critique of oppressive Chinese cultural practices. In a heated dialogue between her family members with the testimony of spirits that she reincarnates and questions, Kingston breaks both the sense of conformity recast in her mother's voice and the conventional patriarchal construction of women's identities. Not until she untangles the threads connecting her Chinese heritage to her American self can she interrogate Chinese conventions through the medium of her new language. It is Kingston's own translation of the myth that helps her reinvent women's selves and positions within Chinese cultural memory. In this new version of the myth, women are no longer reduced to being guardians of authentic traditional values or signifiers of national identity. Rather, they are equal and active participants in the dynamic sphere of history. Through her analysis of Kingston's work, Seyhan evokes the notion of the immobility of women's domestic space, echoing Assia Djebbar and other Arab feminist authors' calls for the termination of women's seclusion from the public sphere where the production of history takes place.

It is possible, therefore, to consider all these narratives as an expression of a "collective will" that does not relinquish their diverse stylistic forms and cultural differences. What Seyhan does best is to interpret these texts as "literature engagée," which contributes to new didactic readings of history, politics, and multiculturalism. Because all these narratives invest simultaneously in political and social criticism, they deliberately deconstruct the amnesic tendencies of history and the fallacies of representation by the victors. In her analysis of storytelling, the main theme of *Damascus Nights*, by the Syrian Rafik Schami, Seyhan points out the polyvalence of Schami's narratives and the continuous debate among his different narrators, representing different social classes and attributes, religions, and experiences. This multiplicity of narratives, she argues, is a response to the Western label of considering the Arab/Islamic world monolithic, where both difference (of thought, opinions, faith, and cultural practices) and political dialogue are lacking. Schami's use of multiple voices reflects the presence of dialogue, diversity, and self-criticism in the Middle East. The silence, implying they refrain from critiquing the state because of fear of retaliation, Schami adds, is transcended into an agency-making storytelling, a new source of a written narrative. Indeed, through her reading of Schami's work, Seyhan reflects her distress with the death of storytelling and the unspoken role of interaction between storyteller and listener. The absence of the former negates the existence of the latter and eventually destroys the listener's ability to produce multiple interpretations of the same story that Seyhan calls uncovering "the layers of circumstantial memories" (42).

Furthermore, Seyhan discusses the persistence of memory, particularly that which has been inscribed into matter: space and women's bodies. Here, the problematic dichotomy of colonized nation and woman is brought up through the narrative of Edwidge Danticat's novel *Breath, Eyes*,

Memory. Haiti, in this case, carries the scars of its colonial rape and misery on the bodies of Haitian women. Inscribed into their flesh and thereby unforgettable, these marks are the signifiers of women's active participation in historical moments. On the other hand, the acts of repetitive rape endured by Haiti/Haitians invoke the Fanonian impossibility of redeeming the violence of colonization. Surprisingly Seyhan does not comment fully on the role of colonization in exacerbating the conditions of women. Nor does she examine the implications of gender power relations in the new nation state. Even though Seyhan announces from the beginning of the study that her focus is only on voluntary exile and systematically avoids analyzing colonial implications, these very relations have contributed to fetishizing the role of women prior to independence and in the present for the sake of an amnesic, manufactured national identity. Hence colonialism inevitably operates within any content of the "postcolonial" experience, and to avoid it may obscure the very difference of the colonial histories.

In the second part of *Writing Outside the Nation*, Seyhan pays considerable attention to the symmetry between Chicano/a and Turkish-German writers, juxtaposing their narratives with one another and highlighting their abilities to speak for each other's experiences of alienation without dismissing their different conditions. Chapter Six, "At Different Borders/ on Common Grounds," addresses the questions of border crossings where the idiosyncratic signs of nationality disappear as well as ties to a specific space or geography. Its languages and modes of expression are also altered, and although occurring on different borders, Germany and the United States, for both these minorities, the experience of fragmentation and displacement is similar. What differs, Seyhan emphasizes, are these authors' distinctive writing styles, use of *jeu de mots*, spontaneous mixing of language codes, and adoption of cross-lingual idioms to articulate their semiotic experiences of loss based on unique personal or families' autobiographies. Moreover, Seyhan accentuates the differences of cultural specificities that dictate their inscriptions of new identities.

In the same chapter, Seyhan traces the history of *Gastarbeiter* (visiting workers) in Germany. Unlike the Chicano/as who have been encouraged to assimilate, Turks and Turkish-Germans are still isolated from mainstream German society and kept at a distance as disposable subjects; their utility depends on the needs of the German economy. Deterritorialized and alienated, the Turkish community started producing a literature "of powerful resonance at the periphery of German society" (102). Writers like Emine Sevgi Özdamar simultaneously highlight the horrendous conditions of passage into Germany and resist the continuous policies of German marginalization. Still, in both the *Gastarbeiter* and Chicano/a cases, the two literary minorities remain neglected among academic circles despite the sophistication of their writings. The response of authors like Özdamar, Danticat, and Ferré is to contaminate the language of the center with their own idioms and produce what Edouard Glissant calls *une contre-poétique* (a counter-discourse) representing their voices. In like manner, they secure recognition for their communities as full-fledged members of those societies with capabilities beyond a working clan; or at least, they turn their translingual narratives into agency where they force some sort of multilingual semiotics to reconfigure the structures of power.

Chapter Five, "Writing Outside the Nation," is about the development of the *Bildungsroman*, its literary characteristics and thematic concerns. In this chapter, Seyhan addresses the new forms of self-representation in some works of several poststructuralist, post-Marxist, and feminist

discourses. She draws a parallel between the traumatic experiences of silenced women and *Gastarbeiter* or political refugees and their contributions to imagine a borderless nation. Their continuous quest for this imagined location is reflected in their inscription and their creative attempts to configure novel forms of literary production and new linguistic and cultural modalities, replacing the singularity of a nation, a wholesome culture or a pure language with a sense of multiplicity.

Rather than submitting to the Hegelian notion of a single universal view of truth, these diasporic narratives aim at transcending many other forgotten views to make the construction of history and culture a shared process based on a collective effort without excluding less privileged groups. Indeed, the completion of re-examining history requires direct communication with the Other. For this purpose, this study points out that these new written narrations can serve to initiate a dialogue between different cultures and nationalities through which we can construct a cultural space for dynamic cultural interactions and new, legible transcultural formations. Consequently, the significance of recognizing the interdependency of languages, translation, and shared cultural experiences is revealed and becomes the incentive driving multiculturalism beyond the discursive interest of semiotics. The contingency of multiculturalism, presumed possible in the near future because of learning languages, can be actualized only when difference is empowered and not dismissed. It is by understanding the Other and addressing the conditions of exclusion that multiculturalism occurs. This book contributes subtly and powerfully to the field of hybridity, migration, and the narratives of diaspora.