

PREFACE

When I was first approached by one of the editors of “Literaturen im Kontext” to present a manuscript for the series, I was excited by the prospect of being part of a group of scholars working in Europe, the Middle East, and the United States who are exploring the questions it poses. Like the others in the series, this book seeks to contribute to the engagements and debates between scholars working with Near Eastern literatures, and in particular furthering literary studies and criticism in Arab contexts. My specific project is to read how several, selected creative literary works written by Lebanese women in Arabic and French ‘rescript’ religious tales in relation to their multiple contexts. These readings provide a detailed exploration of how religious figures and tales are reworked and is specifically concerned with expanding the range of contexts in which they are understood. My point of inquiry into these religious rescriptings begins with the intertextual relationships between contemporary literary texts and their religious pretexts. Because intertextuality, by definition, is concerned with the multiplicity of contexts in which literary works operate, understanding the multiple contexts of these works is a natural avenue of investigation.

The reading method developed in this book attempts to fuse diverse approaches to expand the horizons of how we, as critics writing in academic contexts in Europe and the United States, treat literary texts from Near Eastern and in particular Arab locations. The first two chapters of this book are a discussion of the evolution of this reading method. Each seeks to introduce and highlight the important features of various contexts and methods so as to provide a rich and layered perspective in the more detailed readings of each text that follows. The three subsequent chapters are each largely devoted to one text, but the chapter demarcations are fluid as the texts are constantly brought into dialogue with each other as well as with other texts and contexts. The highly structured arrangement of this book is intentional. Because part of its goal is to explore and investigate methodologies and reading strategies, the first three chapters are devoted to an elaboration on these themes. For the reader who wishes to skip these sections, and continue on to the final three chapters that are devoted to the specific texts themselves, this is possible without losing the thread of the main ideas of the book. The reader is invited to move back and forth between the chapters in any order according to the intertests she or he may have. The last three chapters provide the readings of the novels themselves and are supported by contextual readings of Joseph, Jesus and Job as figures in other settings as well.

A simple definition of intertextuality might be the borrowing material from one text and using it in another. Clearly, these locations of intertextual borrowing can often create tension within literary texts. This study is built upon the premise that the transformative power of literary texts is often located within their sites of tension and conflict in the widest definition of these words. The creative potential of intertextual borrowing here is read in relation to three literary works by Lebanese women authors: Andrée Chedid’s *La femme de Job*, Hudā Barakāt’s *Ḥajar al-ḍaḥīk* and Najwā Barakāt’s *Ḥayāt wa-ālām Ḥamad ibn Sīlāna*. In these three works, three religious figures, Job, Joseph and Jesus are re-written and re-cast. I propose that these rescriptings are each unique engagements with religious texts and traditions, and that through reading them from a variety of angles, these intertextual games prove to be inscribing messages about society – gender, community and nation in particular.

In order fully to explore the range of meanings and possibilities of each of the works treated, an entire chapter is devoted to each novel. Each work is explored in detail and

read in relation to multiple contexts with particular attention paid to the tensions between the texts and these contexts. This approach can be broadly defined as comparative, because it is specifically concerned with multiple locations of intersection, conflict and commonality. My readings here, for example, situate these works in their Arab, Arabic, Lebanese, French, and francophone contexts, as well as in relation to their identification as works by women writers and third world and/or women of color. The concepts of *métissage* and border spaces are further analytical concepts developed in this study to complement the intertextual readings and give them texture. Because one of my concerns is locating the moments of tension and conflict within literary texts and isolating their potential for radical social transformation, I also bring concepts developed by women of color theorists into dialogue with these texts.

A crucial part of my project is to bring together texts, authors and ideas that are often viewed not only in isolation from each other but also are assumed not to 'fit' together. Because this work is limited to the interrogation of one specific literary technique in three novels, vast generalizations cannot and should not be made about any literary 'tradition' or movement. Moreover, I have chosen to work only with women writers and privilege the 'Lebanese' identity of these authors perhaps undermining other labels as ways of reading. Here, I use Lebanon as a category of analysis, but not viewed in isolation from other important contexts such as language. One French and two Arabic language texts are read together in this study and these labels are investigated thoroughly. These categories and contexts are not only used as an entry point for reading the texts but the levels of multiplicity and the permeability of borders are used as sites for exploration and analysis.

This book thus seeks neither to be exhaustive nor to be a definitive study of any one aspect of the subject matter treated within it. Rather, it is designed to be a limited investigation of these texts and how they use intertextuality and the tension it creates in literary texts in order to engage with questions important both to Lebanon, and the world beyond. Specifically I am concerned with several of the main issues confronted by these three works which I identify as religious/confessional identity and pluralism, equality between men and women, gender roles, gender identity and challenges to social conventions, norms and hierarchies.