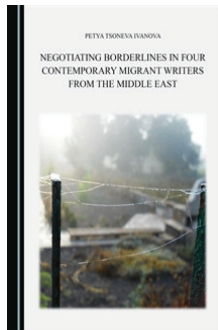


Crossing the Borders of the East:
Petya Tsoneva Ivanova, *Negotiating Borderlines
in Four Contemporary Migrant Writers from the
Middle East*

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In the last two centuries, the geopolitical conflicts especially in the Middle East have contributed to the production of discourses about boundaries. Petya Tsoneva Ivanova, Reader at the Department of English studies at St Cyril and St Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, published her book in 2018 (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing) to explore the experience of crossing boundaries, which entails the transition between places, times and identities, by analyzing selected novels written by Anglophone migrant writers from the Middle East. The book examines aspects of self-location, belonging, displacement, and the negotiation of identity as represented in four novels: Rabih Alameddine's *I, The Divine* (2001), Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* (2003), Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) and Elif Shafak's *Honour* (2011). These narratives tackle stories of forced and voluntary migration in which the characters go figuratively beyond the borders of their original identities, and physically beyond the borders of their Middle Eastern regions. According to Ivanova, the Middle East is "a space that flows into other places and is constantly reshaped by a variety of personal stories, migrant trajectories, departures, and returns" (VIII). The work is a seminal critical contribution to the Middle Eastern cultural and geopolitical studies in general, and the literatures of the Arab Anglophone writers in the diaspora in particular.

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The introductory chapter of the monography provides an account of the history of the geopolitical development of boundaries in the Middle East. A critical reading of the selected novels follows in four chapters with a short conclusion. The argument of the introduction opens by pinpointing the historical significance of the Euphrates and its ambiguous location, which signifies migration, nomadism, and border crossing. As argued in this chapter, the river is like storytelling in the sense that they both play a role in map-reading and map-making. While stories are like rivers, the literary pathways of migrant routes in fiction are like waterways: they all produce imaginative maps of the world (3). This chapter then follows various stages in the construction of the Middle East as an area divided into enclosed regions from the biblical narratives of Abraham, in which the borders coincide with the river, to the Western colonization of the East. Moreover, the introduction relates fact to fiction, drawing attention to the importance of the *Arabian Nights* and other Arabian tales as narratives that crossed and negotiated the borders between the East and the West. The introductory chapter concludes by characterizing the selected writers' works as "literatures-without-fixed-abode" (58), which means that they merge between the traditional Arabic storytelling and the Western means and techniques of narration and representation to address questions of migration, assimilation, racism, marginalization and gender stereotyping.

In the critical reading of the novels, the analysis focuses on the relationship between migration and writing by underscoring how such border-crossing migrant authors place themselves in their fictional texts. Alameddine's novel, *Ivanova* argues, embodies the personal and collective identities of those who experienced trauma in the post-war (Lebanese Civil War) time. As suggested by the title of the chapter, this period has multiple beginnings with unclear ends, which hints at the social and religious life in Lebanon. The war leaves it in persistent ruptures, etched into the personal and collective memory of Lebanon's multi-ethnic population (70). In her narrative, Sarah, the protagonist of the novel, disperses her traumatic experience of the violence of war as well as the violence of rape she witnessed on the Green Line through the remembrance of border crossings between past and present, Lebanon and the US, herself and her Druze family. According to *Ivanova*, rape represents a violent line in Sarah's reminiscences. It also coincides with the Green Line, which is a historic and symbolic line that separates Muslims in the West from Christians in the East in Lebanon (74). To sum up, this chapter discusses how Alameddine depicts manifestations of the multi-cultural diversity in the Lebanese community through

Sarah's narrative in which she moves between times and places, seeking to come to terms with her real identity.

The critical analysis shifts to Jaber's *Crescent*, stressing the incompleteness of identity reflected by the title of the novel. It refers to the relocation of Iraqi migrants, who have limited access to their Arabness, reclaiming the missing home from the U.S. Ivanova regards Sirine, a second-generation migrant, as a migrant with a double displacement. She was raised in her uncle's library of imagined books after the loss of her parents. She also works as a cook in a café, which serves as a remembrance of her mother, cooking Iraqi food. "[S]he does partake of the exilic condition of forbidden return by virtue of her mediated access to the Iraqi part of her origins through her uncle's fantastic stories and her cooking" (98). Thus, both the café/kitchen and the library are places of connectivity and relocation of the past in the present.

The chapter on Halaby's novel deals with the depiction of the Arab-American self-location during and right after one of the most problematic instances of border crossing in the contemporary world, which is the 9/11 period. Having an uncertain sense of belonging, Salwa and Jassim, attempt to relocate themselves in the multi-ethnic space of the US based on their version of the American dream. With their self-relocation, however, an opposite tendency starts working in their psyches, making them long for their home in the Middle East especially after the hardships they experienced in the post-9/11 times. This period witnessed a notable change of attitudes towards the diasporic Arab communities, characterized by the outburst of ethnic discrimination and a great sense of fear and panic in the whole country. In this way, Halaby's main characters, Salwa and Jassim, do not only undergo the loss of their homeland, but also the loss of the imagined American dream.

Shafak's novel negotiates geographical, cultural, and generational distances through the migration experience of the Toprak family from a Kurdish village on the banks of the Euphrates through Istanbul to London. The analysis implies that "Shafak locates the Middle East within the overflowing multiculturalism of diasporic communities and interpersonal relationships" (168). It then turns to one of the traditional practices of family defense in the East, the honor killing, which is exported beyond the Middle East and represented in a Western context. The analysis makes it clear that Esma's role as the narrator is a means of border crossing. The second-generation migrant is both an insider who was raised among the family in the Kurdish village, and an outsider who adopts the cultural norms of self-location in the diaspora as she relocates

herself as a member of the Muslim diaspora in London. Furthermore, this chapter suggests that female twinning is a strategy of border crossing as well. It reproduces the figure of the two-legged compass: one is rooted like Jamila who remains in the village whereas the other is constantly moving like Pembe who joins the family in their continuous mobility.

Ivanova's book has points of strengths as well as points of weaknesses. On the one hand, it is valuable for addressing contemporary issues in the East such as migration and border crossing. In my view, what made Ivanova succeed in the articulation of her main arguments is not only her profound understanding of the selected novels, but also the notable awareness of historical, cultural, political, geographical and even artistic aspects of the Middle East. Moreover, the thesis of the book is clear and is developed effectively. Ivanova presents the ideas in a convincing manner, supporting her arguments by using efficient theoretical methods such as Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical inquiry into how we imagine and experience space, Syed Islam's ethical approach to sameness and otherness, sedentary and nomadic self-location, as well as Tim Ingold's anthropological monograph entitled *Lines: A Brief History* (2007). On the other hand, one of the drawbacks of the book is the relative redundancy in certain parts alongside the use of few unclear terms exclusively in the reading of Shafak's novel. Furthermore, the conclusion also lacks objectivity as it reflects personal opinions, and does not draw precisely on the findings of the discussion. Overall, however, one can claim that Ivanova's text offers a thorough critical reading of the selected novels in terms of negotiating borderlines, and provides key references about the geopolitical and artistic history of the Middle East. For this reason, the possible target audience of the book might be those who are interested in the Middle Eastern cultural, political and literary studies.