

fashion, but it also suggests that the idea of eugenics played a rather negligible role in American literature.

Amin Malak

*Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*

New York: State University of New York Press, 2005. Pp. 81. US \$24.95

Reviewed by Günseli Sönmez İşçi

Although the belief in the superiority of the dominant group has been under attack for quite a long time, a great deal of ambiguity still remains. The values of Islam, for example, are still overlooked and not considered as constitutive elements of historical and cultural development. Amin Malak's comprehensive study of Islam in its literary embodiment is an apt response to this kind of ambiguity and to shallow generalizations about Islam and its people. It is also a response to indifferent academics who relegate Muslim-English texts to the margin of the canon in English studies. What mainly emerges from Malak's valid arguments in this book is the need to acknowledge "the refreshing diversity of voices and visions" (151) expressed creatively by Muslim writers.

Amin Malak's exploration of Muslim authors who write in English and derive their inspirational and narrative material from Islam provides the reader with a challenging and thought-provoking resource for investigation and appreciation. The book begins with an analysis of Muslim identity and language politics adopted by Muslim writers. Malak argues that those Muslim writers who appropriate "a language with a perceived hostile history toward Islam" not only render it "a site of encounter for cultures and peoples on equal terms," and thus shift from "resistance to reconciliation" (11), but also fertilize, muslimize, and enrich it. The same enrichment is located in the narratives of Muslim women writers, which for Malak reveal a clear sense of pride in their Islamic cultural heritage. Most intriguing perhaps is Malak's assessment of Muslim feminists. Malak sheds light on the eloquent, assertive, and distinct voices of women writers who, while rejecting the abusive patriarchal practices in both Western and Islamic societies, retain a distanced attitude toward the reductionism of Euro-American feminism(s), and who, essentially, speak for themselves and in their own voices, rather than reproducing the views of Western feminist theorists.

Malak also attracts attention to a condescending Euro-American posture that shapes the parameters of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, all of which marginalize Islam. While acknowledging the positive impact of the three "posts" in the field of critical inquiry in transforming the way we read texts, Malak distances himself from their exercise of "obfuscation to the detriment of concrete, meaningful values" (16), and he disapproves of the abstract speculations—so common in these approaches—that

reinforce and reproduce the uneven battle between the dispossessed and the hegemonic powers.

The book is composed of eight chapters, each devoted to the close readings of novels and short stories by a wide range of Muslim writers, those who would establish the parameters for the field of Muslim literary studies. The reader, thus, is furnished with revealing portrayals of diverse voices from diverse parts of the world. Malak discusses Indian Muslim writers such as Ahmed Ali, Iqbalunnisa Hussain, Attia Hosain, and Mena Abdullah; the Pakistani woman writer Farhana Sheikh; the Nigerian woman writer Zaynab Alkali; the Somali novelist Nuruddin Farah; the Zanzabari Arab writer Abdulrazak Gurnah; the Canadian writer M. G. Vassanji; the Australian novelist Adib Khan; the Moroccan woman writer Fatima Mernissi; the Malaysian woman writer Che Husna Azhari; the Egyptian woman novelist Ahdaf Soueif; and even the British writer Salman Rushdie—a highly controversial move. Noteworthy is that nine out of the fifteen authors examined in this book are women, a fact that lends evidence both to the productive surge of Muslim women writers as well as Malak's attempt to foreground their distinctive voices and concerns.

Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) and Iqbalunnisa Hussain's *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household* (1944) are referred to as the first Muslim novels ever published in English. It should be noted, however, that this pioneering honor goes to a Turkish woman writer, Halide Edib Adivar. Her novel *The Clown and his Daughter* was published in London by George Allen and Unwin in 1935. Yet, as Malak mentions, the first Muslim fiction written in English is a short story, "Sultana's Dream," published in 1905 by the Bengali woman writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain.

Amin Malak intersperses his theoretical arguments on Islamic identity by drawing on the political contexts of these narratives and on the plurality of voices articulated in the texts. The question still remains why Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*—a discordant text that has created enormous crisis—is included in this book. It is obvious that Malak feels the need to analyze a complex literary text and its polemical writer, automatically associated with the representation of Islam, and to provide an unemotional critical response to the unsupported and misinformed generalizations and often offensive speculations that Rushdie's fiction has generated. For Malak, *The Satanic Verses* does not deserve to be banned but demands debate.

In his conclusion, Malak calls for a better appreciation of Islamic values, and he proposes a fresh paradigm that "foregrounds the cultural and civilizational contexts of Islam as revealed in Muslim narratives in English" (152). His serious and in-depth analysis of these narratives provides a unique opportunity to endorse a fuller self-understanding among Muslims, and among others who are interested in the possibilities of cultural encounter. *Muslim Narratives* thus serves

as an example to promote dialogue and harmony rather than clash and hegemony between civilizations. His book is a welcome and timely contribution not only to English studies, but also to the fields of cultural studies, women's studies, and studies in world literature.

Peter Swirski

*From Lowbrow to Nobrow*

Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005. Pp. 232 \$22.95

Reviewed by Selina Lai

If a good work to T. S. Eliot is one that embraces integrity in tradition yet transcends time and place in its reinvention, then the six coherent chapters of Peter Swirski's *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* are an indispensable read. The first half of the book is a synthetic overview of highbrow and lowbrow art and their kinship. Chapter one uncovers the historical facts behind the functioning of popular fiction, and chapter two analyzes the emergent nobrow aesthetics, while chapter three focuses on the discussion of genres. In the latter half of the book, the writer analyzes three "nobrow" works: Karel Čapek's *War With the Newts* (1936), Raymond Chandler's *Playback* (1958), and Stanislaw Lem's *The Chain of Chance* (1976). *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* not only compels its audience to rethink the idea of genre and the significance of popular art, but opens new cultural ground with myriad discussions.

Highbrow art and its scholars have long held a prejudice against its lowbrow kin. Comparing the two has been regarded as "mixing crab-apples and Sunkist oranges: fruitless at best, incommensurable at worst" (6). Using a synthesis of more than a century of aesthetic arguments, Swirski questions the presumption that *popular equals generic equals bad*. He proposes nobrow as a new analytic, pragmatic, and cultural category whereby "authors simultaneously target both extremes of the literary spectrum" (10). Already by the first decades of the twentieth century, the distinction between the two had diffused into what Swirski names *artertainment*.

Original and thought provoking at every step, Swirski begins with a cross-national look at the development trend in the publishing industry to account for the partial treatment and reception of genre literature, as well as what affects beliefs still that undermine many institutional curricula. While the public is concerned with decreasing literacy and the demise of books in the U.S., Swirski's meticulous research shows otherwise. In the world of inundated print where competition is keen, many writers try to satisfy mainstream tastes to obtain enough readership. While inferior writing is often associated with genre literature, the writer seeks justification by positioning it between popular and canonical art in *relative terms*.