

Between homeland and hostland: Diaspora and the migrant experience in the Middle East

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A recent Israeli documentary film, *The Journey of Van Nguyen*, reviewed in this volume by Nir Avieli and Julia Lerner, presents the complex story of a young woman of Vietnamese origin who was born and lived her entire life in Israel. Van's family arrived in Israel in the 1970s as refugees, and while Van was told about her homeland, she feels "Israeli." Yet, because of her non-Jewish origin and Asian facial features, she seems destined to remain an eternal stranger in her adopted homeland. During her first visit with her father to Vietnam, she realizes that her complex sense of social identity is not going to be "resolved," and like many migrants and refugees, living in the Middle East and elsewhere, she is between and betwixt her two homelands, never fully belonging to either.

In the past decade, a growing body of scholarly work has developed a new vocabulary of analytical terms and a new kind of theorizing to describe and explain the experience of contemporary transnational migrants who, like Van, are caught in between, living in transnational, postmodernist spaces. Indeed, the very concept of "diaspora" had expanded beyond its classical association with the historical traumatic cases of displacement of Jews, Armenians or Africans. Rather than a unique experience of a specific group, the term enables us to explore the dissipation of locality and place, and to engage in critical perspective granted by intercultural encounters. We thus agree with anthropologist James Clifford, who writes: "Contemporary diasporic practices cannot be reduced to epiphenomena of the nation-state or of global capitalism" (1994:302).

Such theoretical developments and redefinitions are particularly important in the Middle East, where social and political realities tend to be discussed in essentialist nationalist and religious terms. The essays in this volume, each from its own perspective, examine the range of articulation of the diasporic experience in the contemporary Middle East. Using a variety of research methods, they show that transnational movements and intercultural encounters are inherently open to a multitude of conflicting interpretations. Taken together, they contribute to our understanding of these rich multi-faceted phenomena of migration and exile in the Middle East.

In the opening article of this volume, Zvi Ben-Dor Benite tells the story of an unlikely pair, Islam and China. Tracing a brief historical episode during which a few

Chinese scholars studied at the top Islamic university of al-Azhar, Ben-Dor is able to expand the classical notion of exiles longing to “return” to their homeland. China had never been under Islamic rule, he argues, yet China’s Muslims articulated a deep “diasporic” self-understanding. How does one explain the deep yearning of Chinese Muslims to the Middle East? What can we learn from this little known historical episode about Islam and the way it has treated its others, especially Judeo-Christian others?

The complexity of the migrant’s experience stands at the center of Yair Huri’s contribution, which explores the life and work of the exiled Iraqi poet, Sa’dī Yūsuf. Huri shows that exile, whether voluntary or forced, entails a sense of temporality and a shaking of external definitions of the self and is thus directly linked to creativity and writing. Yūsuf’s poetic work, most of it written in exile, tells about the pain of dislocation, but also about the power of writing that supercedes, transcends and eventually even nourishes the poet’s work.

The intensity of exilic experiences articulated in literary work is also the center of Liora Hendelman-Baavur’s essay, “Guardians of new spaces,” which reviews and discusses three books, all bestsellers written by and about migrant Iranian women. Looking at these three autobiographical narratives, we learn about multiple exiles and returns, about how “home” is constructed at different phases of the life cycle of these women and about the effort to dispel the orientalist gaze of Euro-Americans on Iranian women.

Claudia Liebelt’s article on Filipina migrant workers in Israel illuminates the ironies of the loaded trope of diaspora, when it is adopted by these migrants in their dealings with those who may be considered the paradigmatic diaspora people, the hegemonic Jewish population of Israel. In this complex reality embedded with irony, the migrant workers’ expression of diasporic terms to Israeli Jews exemplifies the considerable advantage of studying marginal, migrant communities, both for their intrinsic characteristics and for the unique perspective they allow into the underlying taken-for-granted assumptions of the host society.

While writing this introduction, Iranian threats to Israel, Israeli counter-threats and the specter of American and European intervention are headline news, reinforcing the region’s image as the major locus of anxiety and trouble in the world. Haggai Ram’s essay provides a critical analysis of the way Iran is constructed in the Israeli imagination. He traces the manner in which Israeli national interests, the structure of intra-Jewish ethnic relations and orientalist thinking combine to distort the comprehension of historical processes.

The quintessential refugee issue of the Middle East is the Palestinian. While this volume shows how the experience of displacement is common to many communities dispersed across the region, Issa Boullata’s book review returns the discussion to the plight of the Palestinians, as represented by their most acclaimed poet, Mahmoud Darwish. His classical book, *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?*, while specifically addressing the anguish of his own people, adopts richly from wide

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cultural sources and holds universal value in transmitting the deep meaning of dislocation.

We return now to the unlikely story of Van, the young Vietnamese woman whose family found refuge in Israel—a state that commends itself for being built by and for refugees, and whose war of independence brought about a massive refugee problem, unsolvable to this day. Meanwhile, Van has become an esteemed poet in her adopted/native language of Hebrew, exemplifying how dislocated people can influence their host environments. With the growing effects of globalization and the opening of national borders, happening even to the slowly evolving, traditional Middle East cultures, new communities are going to emerge and prosper, and their story, while important in itself, will also enlighten us in the ways by which the Middle East encounters otherness and change. This focused volume can serve as an opening to a much needed discussion that transcends national borders and intra-ethnic and religious boundaries and initiates thinking about movement, displacement and dynamic diversity.

Some of the articles included in this issue were selected by Haggai Ram and Yair Huri from among the papers that were presented at a workshop they organized: The 12th Soref International Workshop, "Exile and Displacement in the Middle East", held at the Department of Middle East Studies (BGU, March-June 2006).

REFERENCE

Clifford, James. (1994). "Diasporas." *Cultural Anthropology*, 9,3:302–338.