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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITLE: Existentialism and commitment in contemporary Arabic literature

PROPONENT/s: DR ALESSANDRO COLUMBU, UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

The influence of existentialism on contemporary Arabic literature remains to this day a relatively understudied subject in European academia. In particular, the relationship between existentialism and literary commitment (iltizām) represents a largely uncharted alley of investigation. Indeed novels, plays and short stories have seemingly not ceased to bring the stage an experimental style that coalesces nationalist and anti-authoritarian concerns with an existentialist style of writing and argues for a form of commitment that does not renounce the concept of absolute freedom of the artist. This panel explores the intersection between existentialism as thought as well as a literary style on one hand, and commitment to the towering pan-Arab causes of nationalism, feminism and emancipation on the other to challenge/confirm the nature of the intersection between existentialism and literary commitment in Arabic as it has crystallized so far.

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL PROPONENTE– SHORT BIO OF PROPONENT

Dr Alessandro Columbu completed his PhD in modern Arabic literature at Edinburgh and is currently Senior Lecturer in Arabic at the University of Westminster, London. His research looks broadly at the intersection between cultural production and the rhetoric of nationalism in Syria and its neighbouring countries. His monograph *Zakariyya Tamir and the Politics of the Syrian short story* was published in 2023 by Bloomsbury. His translation of Zakariyya Tamir's *Sour Grapes* was awarded the 2023 Sheikh Hamad Award for Translation and International Understanding.

Paper 1

Anti-war commitment in Iraqi contemporary theatre

Focusing on one of Awni Karumi's (1945-2006) plays *The Hymn of the Rocking Chair* 1987. And on Muhsin Al-Musawi's historical model of shaping the Iraqi cultural identity in relation to the state-building national paradigm, this paper argues that under the dictatorship of the former regime, a cohort of Iraqi theatre makers heavily relied on theatrical experimentalism departing from realism to express their anti-war views. This artistic shift towards avant-garde techniques raised questions about the role of Iraqi intellectuals when political powers moulded narration.

Dr. Hadeel Abdelhameed is a Senior Research Fellow at Monash University/ Faculty of Education. Abdelhameed's research interests are Iraqi theatre and performing arts (1980-2017), the intersectionality of gender politics and Iraqi theatre, and the relation between the political economy of the Al-Ba'ath regime and Iraqi theatrical life. She has published articles about Iraqi theatre in *The Contemporary Journal of Iraq and Arab Studies*, *MDPI* and *Arab Stage*.

Paper 2

Layla Baalbaki: Existentialism, Feminism, and Disappointment

This paper will highlight the prominent elements of existentialist thought – individual freedom and responsibility, authenticity, and first-person experience – as they pertain to the lived experience of Lina Fayyad, the protagonist in Layla Baalbaki's 1958 novel *I Live*. The paper will argue that, parallel to and compatible with Baalbaki's personal disappointment, the experience of her protagonist reflected the level to which feminist consciousness, in its search for and aspiration to emancipation, hit the wall of reality (customs and traditions of patriarchal society) and remained captive to subjective experiences rather than revolutionize public attitudes toward feminist issues.

Ibtihal Rida Mahmood is an independent researcher and Arabic-English literary translator. She received her BA in English Literature from the University of Jordan in 2005, and her MA in Middle Eastern Studies from The University of Washington's Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies in 2018. Her research interests include contemporary Arabic literature, feminist theory, and Levantine studies. She is the translator and co-editor of *Snow in Amman: An Anthology of Short Stories from Jordan*. She is also the English translator of *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy* by Yassin al-Haj Saleh.

Paper 3

Irāda al-Ġibūrī, the writer's responsibility and the question of commitment

While the « competing visions of the political » implemented by some of the most dominant Iraqi writers who fled the country have recently come under scrutiny, those produced by other authors, especially those who stayed, have been widely neglected. In order to fill this gap, our paper aims to explore the case study of Irāda al-Ġibūrī, a writer who belongs to the so-called “generation of the two wars” (*ġīl al-ḥarbayn*).

Antonio Pacifico is a PhD candidate at the Jean Moulin University of Lyon 3. He obtained his Master's in Comparative Literature from the University of Naples 'L'Orientale'. His research interests include contemporary Iraqi literature and theatre, the relationship between literary and historical narratives, and Arab intellectual history. He published several articles in academic journals such as *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, *La rivista di Arablit* and *LiCarC*. He also was a member of the 'Bureau des jeunes chercheurs' belonging to the Groupement d'Intérêt Scientifique Moyen-Orient et mondes musulmans (GIS MOMM).

Paper 4

Unlocking Meaning: Paratextual Analysis of Sartre in Arabic

Drawing from a corpus of Arabic translations of Jean-Paul Sartre's works, this paper will address the role of translators in the dissemination of existentialism in the Arab space and, more specifically, in reconstructing the production context of the essay. By considering translators as the main importation agents this paper proposes a move away from an intertextual issue focused on the relationship between an original and its translation, to address a series of questions anchored in a dual, hermeneutic, and sociological perspective.

Reda Merida, a contractual doctoral student at EHESS, is preparing a thesis entitled "Philosophy Put to the Test of Translation: On the Arabic Reception of Jean-Paul Sartre." He is also affiliated with the French Institute for the Near East in Jerusalem.

Paper 5

Ghada al-Samman's *other* tetralogy

This paper looks at the existentialist and politically committed nature of Ghāda al-Sammān's early short stories published between 1962 and 1973. Born in Syria and widely celebrated for her novelistic career, this presentation gives centrality to her early short stories as they present narratives that intricately weave individual and collective, and examines how al-Samman's youthful perspective and Sartrean influences shaped her narratives, offering readers a unique lens into the psychological and moral dimensions literary commitment.

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