

**Arab Diasporic Writing:
Figurations of Space and Identity**

The panel entitled “Arab Diasporic Writing: Figurations of Space and Identity” was held on Friday, February 27, at the 2004 Twentieth Century Literature conference at the University of Louisville, Kentucky. Organized

by Carol Fadda-Conrey, the panel featured presentations by Professor Syrine Hout and Lisa A. Weiss on two Arab diasporic writers, Rabih Alameddine and Leïla Sebbar, respectively.

Syrine Hout, an associate professor of English at the American University of Beirut, presented a paper entitled “Lebanon ‘Revisited’: Memory, Self, and Other in Rabih Alameddine’s *The Perv*.” Singling out Alameddine as an example of Anglophone novelists of the Lebanese diaspora, Hout’s presentation handled complex themes of memory, nostalgia, the homeland, and relationships that generate binding ties in her analysis of the short stories featured in *The Perv*. Published in July 1999, this is Alameddine’s second work of fiction. Comprising eight short stories, *The Perv* presents in-depth portrayals of characters in various states of exile and displacement, both mental and physical, cultural and psychological.

In her analysis, Hout presented the cogent case that Alameddine shows, by way of his characters, all of whom have been affected by the Lebanese civil war, how homesickness is more of a “sickness of home,” manifested by what Hout defines as “critical memory of the immediate past of the civil war.” The presentation’s overriding argument, systematically upheld by Hout, shows how the notion of “being at home,” as represented in this work, “is not about belonging to a piece of land but about having a peace of mind which can be enjoyed anywhere.” In her reading of the first story, “The Perv,” and the subsequent stories, Hout arrived at an interesting conclusion: Sammy, the title story’s main character, is actually the creator of the other characters in the collection to such an extent that he and Alameddine become one and the same person. Hout’s analysis of “being at home” in *The Perv* as being engendered “by an emotional reality [more] than a spatial one” brings to the forefront significant concerns in the study of diasporic literature.

Such thematic concerns were also addressed and probed by Lisa Weiss in her presentation entitled “‘Arab’ Paris: Reinterpreting the City-Center through the Writings of Leïla Sebbar.” Weiss, a Ph.D. candidate in French and Francophone literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, lived in Paris during 2003, teaching at the UC Paris Study Center and researching “Beur” cultural production. She identifies “Beur” as a “colloquial identification-term from the 1980s used for second- and third-generation French citizens born in France to North African immigrant parents.”

In her presentation, Weiss focused on the 1982 novel *Shérazade: 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* by the Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar. Delving into a compelling analysis of how Sebbar “use[s] the urban landscape of Paris to explore and remember episodes in the French colonization in Algeria and

the Algerian War for independence,” Weiss represented “Franco-Algerian history and French-Arab identity” as being the central points negotiated by Sebbar’s remappings of urban Paris. Such negotiations, she claimed, involve Sebbar’s reconfigurations of such monumental Parisian sites as the Musée du Louvre, Centre Pompidou, and Les Halles, among others.

Weiss clearly delineated Sebbar’s challenge to mainstream French history and cultural productions by focusing on the novel’s eponymous protagonist, underscoring how Shérazade challenges the nineteenth-century French paintings that she encounters at the Louvre and the Centre Pompidou, with “their Orientalist depictions of Algeria.” In a literal expansion of a French geography and perspective that prove to be too narrow for the novel’s protagonist, Weiss delineates Shérazade’s physical and intellectual passage back to Algeria in order “to gain a more accurate understanding of Algerian history and culture.”

In this way, both Hout’s and Weiss’ presentations converge in their analysis of the self-probing and reassessment of home and cultural representation that their main characters undergo. Interestingly enough, however, these characters often differ in the manner in which they pursue self-discovery. In the case of *The Perv*, for instance, Hout points out how most of Alameddine’s characters distance themselves from home in order to achieve “peace of mind,” whereas Weiss’ analysis of Sebbar’s novel traces a reconsideration of Algerian identity that necessitates an actual return back home. Both presentations significantly broaden the study of diasporic literature, bringing to the forefront important discussions of the state of the Arab writer beyond the geographical framework of his or her home country.

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