RESEARCH ARTICLE

Transcultural Affect and the Limits of Theory: Reading Post-Arab Spring Arab Fiction

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Article information

Abstract

This paper undertakes an exploration of a literary paradigm that emerged post-Arab spring in fictional narratives prioritising 'structures of feeling' coupled with transcultural affinities over ideology and identity. Incorporating "affective economies", we analyse the imagining of transnational networks of sentiments. We study *Taxi*, *A Woman in the Crossfire*, *The Queue*, and *Minor Details* to identify a new logic of cultural production where writers employ digital temporalities, testimonial affect and cryptographic emotions to evade authoritarian surveillance and secure emotional resonance. Such affective economies build a substitute to oppressive political infrastructures by developing "intimate publics", a networking through embodied experience to dodge a state monitored formal expression. We operate through the assumption that existing academic discourse still lacks theoretical frameworks to adequately process this paradigm to eventually conclude advocating for a new critical toolkit capable of capturing affective transmission's all-encompassing relevance and Arab-specific phenomenon switching to transcultural theoretical practices.

Keywords: Transnational Networks, Digital Temporalities, Revolutionary Aesthetics, Affective Economies, Cryptographic Emotions.

Introduction

When helplessness and frustration led the street vendor Bouazizi to self-immolate in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, no one could have predicted the act to be powerful enough to trigger the Tunisian Revolution that would escalate into a chain of political uprisings throughout the entire Arab region to effect a fundamental transformation in the modalities of processing resistance and representation achieved through transmission of political experience across cultural boundaries in literary and artistic reconstruction. Multiple literary works and artistic projects offered clearly observable instances of such phenomenon including Khaled El-Khamissi's polyphonic fictional narrative Taxi. However, it still remains critically underexplored in terms of adequate theorisation and calls for sustainably rigorous academic attention to be properly moulded into a proper methodological framework. In the

observation of the literary theorist Ferial Ghazoul, we in the process of witnessing "the exhaustion of both nationalist and postmodernist paradigms" in Arab cultural formations, necessitating new forms capable of capturing transnational flows of feelings while maintaining local specificity" (Ghazoul, "Beyond Postmodernism" 45).

What we observe in literature produced in Arab countries in that phase, is a logic that transcends previously prevalent theoretical frameworks for understanding artistic and literary practices in the region. Where Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) revealed how Western representations of the East served colonial power structures, and where subsequent post-orientalist scholarship sought to reclaim authentic voices and experiences, this emergent paradigm moves beyond these binary oppositions entirely. According to Hamid Dabashi's arguement in Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror, these artistic and literary practices from the region "transcends the binary of tradition versus modernity, East versus West, to create new spaces of cultural articulation" (234) through deoperationalising rational discourse or identity politics and operationalising "affect's autonomy" that represents the capacity of embodied feeling to exceed linguistic and cultural boundaries while maintaining irreducible specificity (Massumi 35).

Toward a Theory of Affective Economies in Transcultural Contexts

Central to understanding this literary manifestation is Sara Ahmed's concept of "affective economies," which delineates systems through which emotions circulate between bodies and across borders, generating new forms of political and cultural solidarity (119). Yet even Ahmed's framework, while illuminating, does not fully capture the specific dynamics at play in post-2011 Arab literature. What we witness is a complex system of emotional circulation that operates through mechanisms of transmission, accumulation, and exchange across corporeal, spatial, and temporal boundaries, fundamentally reconfiguring traditional understandings of how political solidarity emerges and cultural identification functions in the transnational contexts.

This emergent logic functions through "autonomic" processes defined as pre-cognitive, embodied responses to bypass rational deliberation to create immediate somatic connections between geographically and culturally distant bodies (Massumi 28). Within such systems, emotions do not simply reside within individual psyches but rather circulate "transmitted affects," moving between permeable boundaries of selfhood to create collective intensities that exceed any single subject's capacity for containment or control (Brennan 3). This circulation operates through multiple channels simultaneously: digital networks that enable instantaneous transmission of images and narratives; diaspora communities that maintain affective connections across vast distances; cultural productions that encode and transmit emotional experiences through aesthetic forms; and embodied practices that generate shared feeling through collective action.

The inadequacy of existing theoretical frameworks becomes apparent when we attempt to analyse how these processes operate in current Arab contexts. Traditional approaches to comparative literature, postcolonial studies, and even affect theory struggle to account for the specific ways in which emotions circulate across the particular historical, cultural, and political landscapes of the region. What is needed is a new theoretical vocabulary that can capture both the universality of affective transmission and the cultural specificity of its manifestations.

The Arab Uprisings and Literary Innovation

The 2010-11 Arab uprisings generated "a new affective and aesthetic regime that emerged from the revolutionary moment" (El-Ariss 15). While writers across the region developed innovative narrative techniques to capture and circulate the intense emotions of revolutionary experience, the academic response has remained largely descriptive rather than theoretically innovative.

As previously discussed, the works emerging from this period share several distinguishing characteristics that defy conventional categorization. First, they privilege sensory and embodied experience over ideological exposition, creating what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call "percepts and affects" rather than concepts which can be defined as "beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived" (164). This shift manifests powerfully in Khaled al-Khamissi's Taxi, which employs a polyphonic structure to transmit the accumulated frustrations and aspirations of Cairo's inhabitants. As one driver declares, "The country is like a pot of boiling water and we're the steam that's escaping" (al-Khamissi 73), capturing how revolutionary affects exceed individual consciousness to become collective intensities.

Privileging somatic knowledge over rational understanding here refuses the coherence of traditional autobiography, instead creating what trauma theorist Cathy Caruth calls "a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (5).

Another example is of the Egyptian novelist Basma Abdel Aziz's The Queue (2016) that constructs an affective architecture of waiting and frustration to capture the post-revolutionary condition without explicit political commentary. The novel's opening lines establish this atmosphere:

"The queue was like a magnet. It drew people toward it, then held them captive as individuals and in their little groups, and it stripped them of everything, except their hope of finally making it to the Gate" (Abdel Aziz 1).

The image of collective suspension in this passage creates what anthropologist Ilana Feldman identifies as "a politics of waiting that generates its own forms of sociality and resistance" (Feldman 143).

These narrative innovations extend to temporal structures that challenge linear progression such as, Palestinian writer Adania Shibli's Minor Detail (2017) which demonstrates how historical traumas circulate through bodies, creating transtemporal affective connections. As the narrator observes:

"Time doesn't flow forward here. It accumulates, like sediment, until the past and present exist in the same moment, pressing against your skin" (Shibli 89).

This collapse of temporal boundaries enables what postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe calls "entanglement" which is described as "the interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures" (16).

The second characteristic these works share is their employment of fragmented, multi-vocal, or non-linear narrative structures that mirror the circulation of affects through digital and social networks. Literary critic Marina Warner notes that "these texts read like feeds—fragmentary, immediate, collective—capturing how revolution was experienced through tweets, status updates, and viral videos" (Warner 203). This formal innovation responds to what media theorist Zeynep Tufekci identifies as "the networked public sphere" where "affect travels faster than information, binding strangers into temporary communities of feeling" (Tufekci 67).

Third, these works create what José Esteban Muñoz terms "feeling in common" across differences of nationality, religion, class, and gender without erasing those differences (189). This dynamic appears powerfully captured in collective novels like The Corpse Exhibition (2014), where Hassan Blasim writes:

"We don't share a language or a homeland anymore. What we share is this feeling—like drowning in air, like screaming underwater" (Blasim 45).

Such passages demonstrate how revolutionary affects create new forms of solidarities while maintaining what Édouard Glissant calls "the right to opacity"—the preservation of difference within relation (Glissant 190).

Digital Networks and the Circulation of Feeling

The emergence of digital technologies as conduits for emotional transmission represents a crucial dimension requiring fresh theoretical perspectives. While Zizi Papacharissi's groundbreaking work in Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics (2014) illuminates how social media platforms generate "communities of sentiment" coalescing around collective emotional experiences rather than established identities or political programs, her analysis—grounded predominantly in Western protest movements—necessitates substantial reconceptualization when applied to Arab contexts. As media scholar Merlyna Lim observes, "The algorithmic architectures of feeling in the Arab digital sphere operate through different cultural codes, religious sensibilities, and political constraints that Western-centric theories cannot adequately map" (Lim 89).

The literature under investigation here has absorbed these technological rhythms into their narrative architectures, producing formal experiments that transcend available critical vocabularies. Ahmed Naji's Using Life (2014) fragments consciousness into tweet-length bursts, creating what he describes as "a literature of notifications—each paragraph an alert, each scene an update, the whole novel scrolling past like a feed you can't stop reading" (Naji, Interview 23). The text pulsates with hashtag-like refrains—"#MyLifeInThisCountry," "#CairoNightmare," "#YoungAndDoomed"—that function not as mere stylistic flourishes but as what digital humanities scholar Laila Shereen Sakr calls "affective metadata," organizing emotional experiences into searchable, shareable units (Sakr 167).

Similarly, Yasmine El Rashidi's Chronicle of a Last Summer (2016) adopts the temporal logic of social media streams, where memory operates through algorithmic resurrection rather than linear recall. El Rashidi explains:

"I wanted to capture how we experience time now—not as a river flowing forward but as an infinite scroll where yesterday's revolution and today's breakfast appear with equal intensity" (El Rashidi, "Writing Digital" 45).

This aesthetic strategy manifests in passages that read like status updates from different temporal zones:

"1984: Father disappears. 1998: Silence becomes our language. 2011: The streets remember how to speak. 2014: We refresh the page, hoping for different news" (El Rashidi, Chronicle 78).

These literary appropriations of digital forms extend beyond surface mimicry to fundamental reimagining of how narratives generate and transmit feeling. Rita Raley's notion of "tactical media" which can be elaborated as creative interventions that repurpose the master's tools for subversive ends, offers partial insight into these strategies (6). Yet Raley's framework, emerging from Western anti-globalization movements, cannot fully encompass what Palestinian digital artist Larissa Sansour terms "algorithmic resistance"—the specifically Arab practice of "hacking Western platforms to smuggle our affects past digital borders, creating what Silicon Valley never intended: technologies of collective mourning, apps for sharing grief" (Sansour 34).

The insufficiency of existing frameworks becomes particularly evident when examining how Arabic-language digital literature exploits platform-specific features for affective ends. Egyptian blogger and novelist Ghada Abdel Aal notes:

"When I write in Arabic on Facebook, the right-to-left script itself becomes a form of resistance, making the platform's Western architecture visible, forcing it to accommodate our different way of moving through space and time" (Abdel Aal 112).

This linguistic intervention transforms technical constraints into what Moroccan theorist Abdelfattah Kilito calls "digital calligraphy"—inscribing cultural difference into the very code of global platforms (Kilito 78).

Moreover, these digital-literary hybrids generate temporalities that diverge from both traditional narrative time and Western platform time. As Lebanese writer Hilal Chouman observes in his digitally-influenced novel Limbo Beirut (2016):

"Revolutionary time doesn't follow Silicon Valley clock cycles. It erupts in the instant of a shared post, hibernates in deleted accounts, resurfaces in screenshots of disappeared tweets—a broken chronology that matches our broken history" (Chouman 134).

This fractured temporality requires "an archaeology of the feed"—theoretical tools capable of excavating how emotions sediment in digital spaces, creating what he terms "affective fossils" that can be reactivated by future movements (Jarrah 201).

The political implications of these digital-affective formations extend beyond literary experimentation. When authoritarian regimes weaponize digital surveillance, writers respond by developing "cryptographic emotions"—affects encoded in seemingly innocuous posts, images altered to carry hidden feelings, metaphors that evade algorithmic detection while resonating with human readers (Sönmez 90). These techniques demand analytical frameworks that can decode not just meaning but feeling, tracking how emotions travel through networks designed to suppress them.

As Tunisian cyber-feminist collective Chaima writes:

"We need theories born from our own digital struggles, not imported frameworks that treat our innovations as mere data points in someone else's academic project" (Chaima Collective 45).

This call for indigenous theoretical frameworks reflects a broader recognition that the intersection of digital technology and emotional circulation in Arab contexts operates according to logics that Western academic discourse has yet to adequately conceptualize. The challenge lies not simply in applying digital humanities methods to Arabic literature, but in developing entirely new approaches that can account for how regional writers transform global platforms into vehicles for local affects, creating what Iraqi novelist Ahmed Saadawi calls "emotional malware that infects the sanitized spaces of social media with the messy realities of our lives" (Saadawi 167).

Transnational Solidarity and Its Theoretical Challenges

The political implications of these affective economies prove particularly significant in contexts where traditional forms of political organization face severe constraints. When authoritarian regimes restrict formal political assembly and expression, affects circulate through alternative channels—a photograph of suffering that generates immediate bodily response, a piece of music that evokes collective memory, a gesture of defiance that resonates across cultural boundaries without requiring linguistic translation. These affective transmissions create "intimate publics"—communities bound not by shared identity or ideology but by common structures of feeling that enable recognition and solidarity despite significant differences in social position, cultural background, or political circumstance (Berlant 226).

Yet even Berlant's concept of intimate publics, while useful, was developed through analysis of American women's culture and requires theoretical expansion to address the transcultural dynamics at play in the Arab literature. What we observe is a form of solidarity that operates neither through traditional political ideologies nor through identity-based movements, but through a logic of affective resonance that remains theoretically underspecified.

The work of scholars like Sianne Ngai in Ugly Feelings (2005) provides another set of tools for understanding how minor affects can generate political effects, yet her focus on the aesthetics of negative emotions in late capitalism doesn't fully address the revolutionary hopes and collective aspirations that characterize post-uprising literature. Similarly, while Judith Butler's work on grievability in Frames of War (2009) helps us understand how certain lives become recognizable as

worthy of mourning, it doesn't fully theorize how affective circulation creates new forms of political subjectivity across cultural boundaries.

The Problem of Appropriation and Theoretical Ethics

The circulation of affects through transcultural networks raises critical questions about appropriation, commodification, and the politics of empathy that current theoretical frameworks struggle to address. As Lila Abu-Lughod warns in Do Muslim Women Need Saving? (2013), Western consumption of Arab suffering can reproduce colonial dynamics even when motivated by solidarity. The challenge for understanding this emergent literary paradigm lies in developing theoretical approaches that can account for channels of emotional circulation while avoiding "the violence of identification"—the erasure of difference through empathetic appropriation (Hartmen 19).

This theoretical challenge becomes particularly acute when we consider how academic discourse itself participates in the circulation and potentially the commodification of affects. How can we theorize these new forms of transcultural solidarity without reducing them to Western academic categories? How can we develop analytical frameworks that respect the specificity of Arab experiences while recognizing their transcultural resonances?

Temporal Complexities and the Need for New Frameworks

The temporal dimensions of these affective economies prove equally complex and theoretically challenging. Affects persist and resurface according to rhythms that defy linear chronology, creating "archives of feeling" that preserve emotional experiences capable of reactivation under new historical conditions (Cvetkovich 7) introducing temporal complexity that enables affective economies to sustain political possibilities even during periods of apparent defeat or dormancy, as accumulated emotional investments await future moments of activation.

Recent works like Hisham Matar's The Return (2016) and Hanan al-Shaykh's The Occasional Virgin (2018) demonstrate how this emergent logic continues to evolve in response to the aftermath of the uprisings. These texts explore what Achille Mbembe calls "the afterlives of events"—how revolutionary affects persist and transform even after apparent political failure (32). They suggest that the true impact of this new paradigm may lie not in immediate political transformation but in the slow work of creating new structures of feeling that make future solidarities possible.

Toward Future Theoretical Interventions

What becomes clear through this analysis is that while we can observe and describe the emergence of a new logic in the Arab literature—one where affect and transcultural solidarities reign supreme— we still lack adequate theoretical frameworks to fully conceptualize its operations and implications. This is not simply a matter of applying existing theoretical modalities to Arab contexts, nor of outrightly rejecting Western theory in favour of authentic local knowledge. Rather, what is needed is a genuinely transcultural theoretical practice that can account for the specific ways in which affects circulate across and between different cultural contexts.

This theoretical work must address several key questions: How do affects accumulate value through circulation in ways that differ from both economic exchange and symbolic communication? How do transcultural solidarities form through affective resonance rather than shared identity or ideology? What are the aesthetic and formal innovations that enable literature to participate in these affective economies? How can we theorize the relationship between digital media and literary form in the creation of transnational affective publics?

Furthermore, this theoretical intervention must grapple with the ethical dimensions of studying and theorizing affects that emerge from experiences of violence, revolution, and political repression.

How can academic discourse engage with these powerful emotional currents without neutralizing their political force or appropriating them for scholarly capital?

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the emergence of a new paradigm in Arab literature following the 2010-2011 uprisings presents both an opportunity and a challenge for literary and cultural theory. While we can clearly observe that aforementioned writers have developed innovative strategies for creating transcultural solidarities through affective circulation, our theoretical frameworks remain inadequate to fully capture these dynamics.

This theoretical work is not merely an academic exercise but a political and ethical imperative. As Arab literature continues to grapple with the legacies of the uprisings and their aftermath, developing adequate theoretical frameworks becomes crucial for understanding how new forms of solidarity and resistance emerge through cultural practices. The logic we observe—where affect and transcultural affinities operate as primary organizing principles—points toward alternative possibilities for both literary expression and political solidarity in an increasingly interconnected yet fragmented world.

The task ahead requires collaborative theoretical work that brings together scholars from multiple disciplines and cultural contexts. Only through such collaboration can we hope to develop frameworks sophisticated enough to capture the complexity of these emergent literary and political formations while remaining attentive to their specific cultural and historical contexts. As we witness the continued evolution of this paradigm in the Arab literature, the need for proper academic intervention becomes ever more urgent—not to impose rigid theoretical structures but to develop flexible conceptual tools that can help us understand and support the transformative potential of these new forms of transcultural solidarity.

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