MODERN LITERATURE

Paper 4: “Reading Moroccan Literature in the Age of Circulation”

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This paper discusses several recent Moroccan works of literature, created by artists based both in Morocco and the diaspora, that engage questions of globalization and culture. I argue that “circulation” is a common thematic concern in many such texts of the past decade, albeit handled differently across them, and further that circulation offers a means by which to understand the relationship of globalization to recent literary and cultural production. Attention to circulation opens several critical avenues: to put in dialogue the cultural production of the Moroccan diaspora and Morocco without collapsing their differences; to identify a new paradigm of cultural production that follows the “postcolonial” period; and to link elements within these texts to the material and geopolitical concerns they engage.

The larger goal is to try to develop a method for reading literary and film texts (and not only from Morocco, but from the greater Maghrib and Middle East) within the cultural conditions associated with globalization, particularly the new types of media and textual production (satellite TV, the internet, blogs and chatrooms, TXT messaging, etc.), the acceleration of various forms of transnational movement of bodies, finances, images, etc., and the changing role of the U.S. both as geopolitical entity and as provenance of American global culture.

The paper is anchored by discussion of individual literary works including Abdelkader Benali’s Dutch-language, Bruiloft aan zee (published in English translation as Wedding by the Sea, 1999), Soumya Zahy’s On ne rentrera peut-être plus jamais chez nous (2001), and Laila Lalami’s Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits (2005). Briefer mention of other literary texts by authors such as Tahar Ben Jelloun, Laila Abouzeid, Driss Ksikes, and Abdellah Taïa, and such recent Moroccan films as Baidaoua (1999), Ali Zaoua (2000), Le grand voyage (2004), and the controversial Marock (2005), as well as the digital VCDs by Casablanca media artist Miloudi (2004-06), will be made in passing. As a group, these texts deserve attention not only on their literary or cinematic merits, but also because they make vivid a variety of intertwined features of Morocco in the era of globalization.

By “globalization,” an overused and frequently undertheorized term, I mean something akin to the use of the term by cultural anthropologists who are sensitive both to economic and demographic change and to the category of the imagination. Namely, globalization is the accelerated transnational movement of capital that follows the world wide shift away from nationally anchored currencies in 1973. “Globalization” is also the episteme that emerges during this period—the cultural imaginaries that are formed by subjects brought into new communication by a variety of digital technologies and accelerated or enhanced transport of bodies, images, finances and ideas (Appadurai, 1996, 2001). In their important essay “Cultures of Circulation” (2002), Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma have announced this cultural shift in even starker terms: “The advent of circulation-based capitalism, along with the social forms and technologies that complement it, signifies more than a shift in emphasis. It constitutes a new stage in the history of capitalism.” If we are to take this proposition seriously, which I think we must, there will need to be a reassessment of social forms – including literature, cinema, art, etc. – that emerge within this new stage.