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ROSWITHA BADRY

## Foreword

This volume is a selection of papers originally read in English at the fifth edition of the International Conference on “Orient in Literature – Literature of the Orient” (OLLO), which took place from 28 March to 29 March 2019 at the Faculty of Languages of the Nicolaus Copernicus University (NCU) in Torun. The contributions initially presented in Polish have been compiled in a separate volume. Like in the former editions of OLLO Conferences, the first of which was held in March 2014, the idea was to bring together specialists in literary, cultural and language studies dealing with Asian and African literary heritage, as well as researchers focusing on the reception of Oriental subjects and motifs in Western (European) literary texts in order to discuss the problems of perception, interpretation, and/or translation of Oriental literatures. The conference was organized by the representatives of the three Oriental units at the NCU – Adam Bednarczyk (the Department of Japanese Studies), Magdalena Kubarek and Magdalena Lewicka (the Centre of Arabic Language and Culture), and Maciej Szatkowski (the Centre of Chinese Language and Culture) – who are also the editors of the two volumes. Thanks to the perfect organization, and the help of many hands and minds before and during the conference (research assistants, administrators, students, etc.), the meeting of 60 scholars from 19 countries became a great success. After this unforgettable event with its convivial, warm atmosphere and a great number of fruitful and inspiring discussions, I want to express my deep gratitude to all persons involved in the organization of the conference and the editing of the articles. In addition, I assume that most, if not all, participants of the last OLLO conference regret that in 2020 no international academic meeting like this was possible.

The key theme of the fifth edition of the OLLO conference was “Literature towards freedom and oppression”. It is a multi-layered and multi-faceted theme indeed, and it goes without saying that no volume of conference proceedings is able account for its full scope; it can only provide us with valuable insights into the multiple aspects and dimensions related to the topic.

The present volume consists of 20 articles that cover a wide range of perspectives and approaches. While the conference in addition to keynote speeches (two in English and two in Polish) was split into parallel panel sessions dedicated to specific regions and themes, this book is alphabetically arranged<sup>1</sup>, not least because of the disparity of material and the depth of individual analyses. The majority of the contributions deal with contemporary literature written from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the present by writers from different countries and regions of Africa (Egypt, Nigeria and Somalia) and, above all, Asia (Kuwait, Qatar, Iranian Azerbaijan, India, China and Japan). Only two articles explore ancient and early medieval texts (Iwona Milewska on stories in the Indian epic *Mahābhārata* and Arzu A. Sadykhova on Arabic poetry). Four articles focus on the perception and representation of “the Orient” through “Western” eyes; one of these studies (by Zofia Litwinowicz-Krutnik) is exclusively devoted to film material, while another article (by Maria Szafrńska-Chmielarz) takes also films into consideration. Rare, ephemeral exceptions notwithstanding, these contributions generally demonstrate the extent to which their sources reproduce the stereotypical, distorted images of “the Orient” as outlined in Edward Said’s seminal work and in more recent postcolonial studies on (Neo-)Orientalism, Exotism and/or (Ethno-Racial) Othering. However, it is noteworthy that even the wife of a French colonial servant in Morocco (see Małgorzata Sokołowicz’s article on the French painter and writer A.-R. de Lens), and even more so Polish travellers to the Orient (though Poland did not belong to the European colonial powers; see the article by Anna Kołos) adopted such a clichéd, one-sided, dichotomous worldview.

Most contributions are based on the analysis of fictional (novels, short stories, plays) and non-fictional (autobiographies, memoirs, travelogues, essays) prose texts, and – to a lesser extent – of poetry. Without doubt, the novel is the predominant medium used to address societal ills as well as individual and collective hopes and expectations. Though only a few authors may consider themselves political activists (e.g. Takahashi Gen’ichirō, Wole Soyinka, Nawāl as-Sa’dāwī, and Liao Yiwu), most of the contemporary literary works analysed in this volume may be seen as committed literature in Jean-Paul Sartre’s sense of *littérature engagée*, appealing to the artist’s responsibility to address widespread grievances in his/her respective context. To put it more neutrally, one may also speak of a form

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<sup>1</sup> Beginning with my own article (I am lucky that my family name starts with “B”) and ending with Paweł Zygałdo’s text.

of political intervention caused by the direct or indirect experience of a tragic incident, of discrimination and/or repression. In contrast to early examples of “engaged literature”, the more recent products are less ideologically tinted but rather show deep concerns and worries about local, regional, and global tendencies such as rise of authoritarianism and populism, increasing social fragmentation, corruption, inequality, injustice and extreme violence, together with alarming signs of growing de-humanization resulting from the greedy neo-liberal capitalist system. Women writers, who are perhaps more inspired by Simone de Beauvoir than Sartre, place special emphasis on the perpetuation and continued relevance of patriarchal power mechanisms that reproduce unequal gender relations. Some of the female authors do not portray their protagonists as victims, but as active defenders of their personal freedom who transgress the socially prescribed limits through agency and resistance, sometimes coupled with strategies such as irony, irreverence and humour, yet without ignoring the psychological and emotional effects of discrimination. Socio-critical literary works of this kind can be regarded as a counter-discourse, for they challenge the dominant discourse and call for things like a new contract between state (government) and society (citizens) which would recognise plurality and mutual respect and promote a more balanced, humanist orientation. Being aware of the global interconnectivity, these works seem to envision a transnational solution.

Supposedly, the four articles on recent Japanese literature in the aftermath of “3.11”, as the triple disaster of 11 March 2011 is often referred to, may best illustrate the previous remarks. Moreover, they might be most interesting and elucidating for a wider public, as they also form a larger unit among the articles related to other regions or countries, and draw a picture of Japan that contradicts the mainstream image. While Lisette Gebhardt (University of Frankfurt/Main) presents in her article, based on her keynote speech, an overview of the new revival of political literature exemplified by three authors and their novels, the other three articles (by Filippo Cervelli, Christian Chappelow, and Adam Greguš) concentrate on single authors and their literary output. All texts, fictional as well as non-fictional, depict a dark, dystopian future Japan. In their scathing critique of Japanese society the writers point, *inter alia*, to the revival of totalitarian, neo-fascist, and militarist tendencies in Japanese policies of the past decade; the inadequate representation of citizens; the manipulation of messages sent to the citizens which diverts their attention to minor problems of daily life and generates political apathy; and the death penalty as a manifestation of a mechanism of oppression upheld by the socio-political framework, lack of humanity, and enduring patriarchal gender relations.

The remaining material comprises six articles on the Middle East and North Africa (contributions by Dominika Czerska-Saumande, Nihad Fottouh, Najla Kalach, etc.), including the article based on the other keynote speech by Stephan Guth (University of Oslo), a survey of three utopian novellas from three different

periods which points to similarities to the development of the genre in the West; one essay on Africa (by Khedidja Chergui) with a focus on the dictatorship phenomenon in postcolonial Nigeria and Somalia (and in other parts of Africa) as depicted in the dramas and novels by two well-known authors (Nuruddin Farah and Wole Soyinka); three studies on Indian (by Weronika Rokicka, Jacek Skup, and the already mentioned Iwona Milewska's article) as well as two contributions on Chinese literature (by Daniela Zhang Cziráková and Paweł Zygałło). These articles refer to such aspects as the freedom of conscience, belief/religion, and expression being a prerequisite for creativity, particularly when the latter is threatened by state and non-state actors; social constraints on women's emancipation as well as forms of cultural and structural oppression, including psychological and social consequences of internalized "proper behavior" for men and women; travelling and writing as a way of self-emancipation; the prominent idea of social justice, but also of nationalism and patriotism; questioning "the freedom of choice" when dependencies exist and/or no alternative is given; keeping alive the memory of crimes against humanity as a response to official silence; and skepticism towards the promises of modernity.

In sum, this book should be regarded as a timely volume, though nobody could have foreseen that the year 2019 would be remembered in retrospective as "the year of protests"<sup>2</sup>, and that new protests would proliferate in 2020 as well, despite the rapid spreading of COVID-19 worldwide, harsh restrictions and lockdowns<sup>3</sup>. There is no doubt that other protests will follow because of the manifold long-standing and fresh grievances in most parts of the world, whether they are considered as "East" or "West", "North" or "South". Several observers have pointed to the fact that it is not only well-known authoritarian regimes that are using the epidemic as a pretext to further suppress human rights, among them the right to freedom of expression. To quote from the "Resolution on Freedom of Expression in the Time of COVID-19", adopted by the Assembly of Delegates of PEN International, during its 86<sup>th</sup> Annual Congress, held in November 2020:

The COVID-19 pandemic poses an unprecedented global challenge requiring monumental governmental responses. The potential exists, however, for the crisis to be exploited to constrain freedom of expression. Public access to sound medical and scientific information about the virus must not be limited to suit political or economic interests, and the context of this emergency cannot be used by governments to further silence voices of opposition. The PEN International community is monitoring a worldwide

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g., (Robin) Wright, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-story-of-2019-protests-in-every-corner-of-the-globe> (orig. 30 Dec. 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Press and Thomas Carothers, *Worldwide Protests in 2020: A Year in Review*, 21 Dec. 2020 [<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/12/21/worldwide-protests-in-2020-year-in-review-pub-83445>].

array of cases in which journalists, activists, doctors, government officials, and others have been arrested, silenced, demoted or otherwise come under attack for speaking out about the pandemic. There are also concerning attempts at using laws to restrict expression or impose surveillance under the guise of fighting COVID-19.<sup>4</sup>

To conclude, I hope that the conference proceedings will inspire further workshops and symposia in the near future, with meetings held not in cyberspace, but in the very real world – without fear, and full of vivid discussions and happy laughter.

Freiburg University, still in lockdown,  
mid-January 2021 (& ongoing, mid-April 2021)

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<sup>4</sup> <https://pen-international.org/who-we-are/annual-congress/2020/pen-resolution-on-freedom-of-expression-in-the-time-of-covid-19> (all URLs accessed on 14 Jan. 2021).