Negotiating Borderlines in Four Contemporary Migrant Writers from the Middle East

Negotiating Borderlines in Four Contemporary Migrant Writers from the Middle East

By

Petya Tsoneva Ivanova

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Negotiating Borderlines in Four Contemporary Migrant Writers from the Middle East

By Petya Tsoneva Ivanova

This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-1606-7
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1606-9

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My “thank you” goes to Delia Kazakova, my mother and teacher from whom I learned about the art of reading life’s texts; to Ludmilla Kostova, my academic advisor and presently chair of the Bulgarian Society for British Studies, from whom I learned about the blessings of self-criticism; and to Svilen Kolev, university teacher and pastor, from whom I learned a lesson about bordered freedom. I am particularly grateful to the ESSE network for their timely support of the short-term research I carried out at the School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and the British Library in London, the outcome of which is the present book. Much appreciated is also Cambridge Scholars’ encouragement and expert help in the publication process. I would like to thank Glyn Hambrook from the University of Wolverhampton for his continual assistance, the reviewers of my work and my colleagues at the University of Veliko Tarnovo and the University of Tbilisi for their cooperation. The annual international literary symposium held in Tbilisi was my practical experience of the “living” Middle East through contacts with colleagues from Azerbaijan, Iran, Lebanon and Turkey opening a border space where their academic contributions circulated in dialogue with those of their colleagues from Europe and the United States. The effect was contagiously inspiring.

Sincere thanks also to the unnamed presence of family, friends and the spirit of generosity without which my work would have lacked the awareness that, unlike the exclusionary limits of human constructions, the celestial dome shelters everybody.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This book is inspired by the increased awareness that the world of today is exceptionally sensitive to boundaries. The intensity of geopolitical conflicts and their spectacular concentration in the last two centuries as well as the accelerated pace of their continuation in the present day have produced discourses of both extreme openness and extreme closure of geopolitical borderlines. The frequency of forced and voluntary migration, along with the mass displacements that followed after decolonisation, is held responsible for the frittering borders of both the former empires and their colonies. Against this background, contemporary critical debates tend to embrace the assumption that boundaries, as Michel Foucault, Nicole Schroeder, Syed Islam, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Stephen Klingman argue, are not as much sites of division/connection, but movements of transition in the continuous flow between places/times/identities.

My investigation seeks to contribute to this field of studies by focusing on a particular and rather problematic case of negotiating border space – the persistent tendency to represent the "Middle East" as a region enclosed in relatively impermeable boundaries. The inherent openness of this part of the world is suggested by the ambiguity of the very term "Middle East", which implies both transition between places and cultures, and the intention to delimit this transition in a culturally (and even geographically) questionable static label. This perspective of enclosure haunts Middle Eastern studies and is part of ongoing cultural debates on cross-border circulation. In the present book I analyse critically works of four contemporary Anglophone migrant writers from the "Middle East" to demonstrate that in spite of the resistant lines that remain after religious, ethnic and political disputes have come and gone, this region does not exist as a rigidly delimited place in the writing of migrants who claim it back from beyond its borders. Rather than being a permanent location, it is constructed as a place that flows into other places and is constantly reshaped by a variety of personal stories, migrant trajectories, departures and returns.

The writers whose work I read analytically come from different parts of the "Middle East" and their self-location feeds different narratives of belonging and displacement into the migrant experience that binds them together in their writing. In the theoretical part of the present critical

undertaking I dwell on the principle of comparison which enables the juxtaposition of their perspectives – the concept of *Ansatzpunkt* (point of departure), introduced by Erich Auerbach and employed by scholars like Jonathan Culler and Søren Frank. I likewise underscore the relationship between writing and migration, and the importance of its current intensity, which requires consideration of postcolonial experience and theory alongside ethical questions about negotiation of identity and difference. I also provide a rationale for my selection of the writers and texts – although they represent only nuances in the variety of regional migrant voices, I selected them according to their willingness to negotiate difference and accept it as a productive space of overcoming religious, ethnic and politically entrenched hostilities. All of the works analysed are samples of Anglophone writing. Elif Shafak's fiction, in particular, comes into being in the course of a peculiar linguistic "migration" – most of her novels are first written in English, then translated into Turkish and reworked by Shafak before their release in Turkish. These linguistic metamorphoses add to the borderline quality of migrant writing which finds its figurative equivalent in the metaphoric topography of river-like prose. In this sense, the works that come under my scrutiny are themselves flowing borderlines that weave their course along, but most of the time, beyond the conduits of political, cultural, ethnic and interpersonal division.

The analytical part of this investigation offers critical reading of Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (2001), Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003), Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) and Elif Shafak's novel *Honour* (2012). Alameddine is a Lebanese-American painter and writer. He was born in Amman, Jordan, grew up in Kuwait and Lebanon which he left at the age of 17 to live first in England and then in California. Abu-Jaber was born in New York. Her father was Jordanian and her mother, American, descended from Irish and German roots. At the age of seven, Abu-Jaber briefly moved to Jordan with her family. She currently divides her time between Miami and Portland, and teaches at Portland State University. Halaby was born in Beirut to a Jordanian father and an American mother, grew up mostly in Arizona and has lived in the United States (the US), Jordan and Italy. Shafak was born Elif Bilgin in Strasbourg to philosopher Nuri Bilgin and Şafak Atayman, who later became a diplomat. Şafak adopted her mother's name and changed it to *Shafak* as her artistic name. She has lived around the world – Madrid, Amman, Boston, Michigan, Arizona, Istanbul and London.

The present book is concerned with the question of how such cross-border writers locate themselves through their writing in a fictional border space in which the different places of their biographies fuse into a

continuous border, an example of "moving space" that flows beyond firmly-fixed limits. Residing in this fluid space allows them to re-imagine both the "Middle East" and the "West" in their memories, dreams and literary reconstructions as constantly moving thresholds that coincide with their own self-invented positions. Specifically, I turn to narrative and genre studies to locate borderline aspects of their works. They employ patterns of connectivity inherited from oral and artistic traditions such as those recorded in the *Arabian Nights* and the ornamental (mosaic and calligraphic) traditions of arabesque designs. Moreover, these techniques operate within western aesthetic modes of representation and lend their vibrant power of contestation to the migrant narrative perspective. The outcome of such interaction is literary works that not only emerge in border spaces, but also generate a border space that erodes the rigid and violent discourses of border control and elimination of difference.

Overview

Chapter 1 entitled **"Beyond the Banks of the Euphrates: Rivers and Borders. Towards a Topology of Fluctuation"** is introductory. It seeks to flesh out the symbolic significance of the river in the title – the Euphrates – by mythological, historical and political narratives of separation and connectivity; to see how its ambiguous location refers to migration, nomadism and border crossing; and to "transplant" the actual river from its geographical whereabouts to its more abstract but equally vigorous fictional location as "riwāya" (from Arabic – "abundant water", but also meaning "storytelling", "narration").[1]

Once established, the river-border-narrative reference expands in the other sections of the chapter to embrace major theoretical models of border space and a historical survey of the rise, development and transfigurations of the "Middle East" at different stages of political, cultural and literary awareness. The spatial models conjoin different perspectives – from Mircea Eliade's cosmogony in *The Sacred and the Profane* through Jacques Lacan's psychological analysis of specular reflection and Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical inquiry into the way we imagine and experience space; to Syed Islam's ethical approach to sameness and otherness, sedentary and nomadic self-location. Tim Ingold's anthropological research in *Lines: A Brief History* is a major theoretical point of reference as it helps explain the tension between fixity (rootedness) and mobility (routed-ness) in narratives of border crossing. The historical account adopts a Foucauldian perspective and follows various stages in the construction of the "Middle East" by both political

events and imaginative undertakings with a particular emphasis on power structures and the discourses produced within them. This mechanism of localisation can be observed in both European literature and in Middle Eastern narratives about Europe. Thus, the "orientalisation" of the East occurs in reciprocity with the "occidentalisation" of the West, as Rasheed el-Enany suggests.[2]

The problematic representation of the Middle East and its controversial experience become complicated by the expansion and acceleration of current terrorist assaults, mostly attributed to religious radicalism (radical Islam), which have enhanced the fortification of existing borderlines and the formation of new ones. This complication represents a predicament in postcolonial studies for as long as a secular apparatus of thought attempts to produce viable contentions about an edifice raised upon a religious foundation. I address this issue in a separate section of the chapter.

The next section argues that unlike the rigid lines of Islamism, consolidated by its religious and political agenda, aesthetic representation enjoys greater mobility and openness in Islamic cultures. The analysis of artistic and literary work produced in the context of close partnership between religious and secular environments demonstrates that unlike the severity of dogmatic Islam its artistic manifestations allow for intensive cross-border interaction with European secular artistic and literary forms (such as the novel). Dwelling on emblematic cross-cultural texts like the *Arabian Nights* and vernacular narrative forms such as the above-mentioned "riwāya", I argue against the assumption that Middle Eastern literary forms emerged as a consequence of European cultural colonisation and support the contention that they attest to the processes of a dynamic cross-border interaction.

Finally, the Introduction moves to a discussion of migrant writing and the way it revisits rigidly-drawn borderlines in cross-border movement. This section develops in active cooperation with Søren Frank and Stephen Clingman's perspectives on migration and literature to suggest that in migration literature border crossing finds expression in aesthetic devices that not only ensure collation, like the collage/mosaic techniques of assembly, but also yield transfusion of the collated locations, times and identities in a fictional border space that provides what political lines and grids are unlikely to produce – negotiation of difference.

The concluding section consists of subsections that consider diasporic formulations of the Middle East and Arab American diasporic writing, in particular, as part of the literatures-without-a-fixed-abode, a situation discussed by Ottmar Ette's book *Writing-between-Worlds* (2016). This subsection contextualises Alameddine, Abu-Jaber and Halaby's writing.

The next subsection dwells on Shafak and the manifestations of self-orientalism in her works as an anti-Kemalist manoeuvre of remembering traditional past and vectorising it in a contemporary setting (within and beyond vernacular borders).

Chapter 2 entitled **"Multiple Beginnings and Missing Ends. Border Crossing in Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine*"**, is the first chapter to explore analytically a literary articulation of border crossing. I start with Alameddine not only because of chronological considerations, but also due to the scope and plasticity of his response to borders. *I, the Divine* is a novel that takes shape as an aesthetic solution to a profoundly ethical problem. Written from the perspective of the female protagonist Sarah el-Din in the form of suspended first chapters, it represents a textual reassembly of personal and collective broken identities in a continuous cross-border movement. While the multiple starts are symptomatic of the time of Lebanese post-war transition experienced as an unending "now" that holds both warnings and promises, they likewise operate as the equivalent to Alameddine's artistic experimentation with serial self-portrayal. In it, every sample of the series reveals an alternative identity and the whole set should therefore be assessed not in terms of its accomplishment, but as a work that testifies to the progress of identity construction. Sarah's artistic project helps her disperse her traumatic experience of war violence and rape on the Green Line through numerous remembered border crossings between past and present, Lebanon and the US, herself and family members. This cross-border mobility negotiates a number of rigid lines shaped by and shaping Sarah's experience. While the missing ends of her stories produce a narrative version of Shahrazad's serial storytelling, they likewise signify extreme openness and readiness to embrace difference. In this sense, one of the most effective patterns of contesting violent dividing lines in the novel resides in a recurrent inspection of tropes of fluidity. Most of the indirect references to Sarah's rape (including her first unfinished attempt at telling it), for instance, consider the quotidian practice of taking a bath. Washing herself, Sarah wishes she could remove the many layers of her self and reach the simplicity of absence. In a parallel manner, her American mother is later expelled from their Lebanese family because rather than trying to "float", i.e. navigate, the border space of the ethnic and cultural divide, she attempts to swim, to cross it. "Floating" rather than "swimming" is the novel's major mechanism of successful border transition and Sarah works it out to come to terms with her problematic relation to both Lebanon and the US.

Chapter 3, **"Migrant New Moons. Navigating Border Space in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*"**, assesses the potential of incompleteness, which enables migrant diasporic writing to reclaim missing homes in a continuous nomadic reinvention. Symbolised by the crescent form and encoded in the title of the novel, incompleteness multiplies the lunar paradigm in a variety of occurrences (from crescent-shaped cookies to the fruitful land between the Tigris and the Euphrates) that impart a particular specular quality to the narration. As a mighty celestial reflector of cosmic light, the moon is a cosmic mirror whose irregular surface and distance from the Earth presuppose the dimness of its reflective capacity. The specular properties of the crescent are enhanced by the vast expanses of ocean and desert that complicate the frequent cross-cuts between the protagonists' versions of home and postpone their self-location. Sand and water, themselves natural mirrors, further refract, distort, multiply and disperse the places, times and relationships that constitute the whereabouts of actual and imagined homes. The characters traverse a space of reflections that forms in the liquid threshold between the US and Iraq and attempt to stabilise their itineraries by the predictability of rhythmic movement – cooking, storytelling, academic work, photography. These activities, however, fail to produce the comfort of settlement. Rather, they are performed as repetitive relocations of a travelling home in the nomadic fluctuations of space.

Chapter 4 is entitled **"Torn Threads and Water Spills: Migrant Self-Location against Terror in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*."** Halaby's writing explores the precarious grounds of migrant and, in particular, Arab American self-location that hinges upon distance and proximity, election and selection in one of the most problematic instances of border crossing in the contemporary world – 9/11. The novel raises major concerns about the tendency to conflate "places" with "belonging", i.e. to "place" belonging in clearly defined whereabouts or expectations. The solidification of postulated borderlines in the aftermath of 9/11 and the subsequent formation of "shared space" under a regime of tight surveillance further testify to the surging processes of "selection" (exemplifying racial hostility) and "election", asserting the protagonists' attempts to relocate themselves against fear and ethnic incrimination through their American relationships. These spatial reformulations likewise demonstrate how the US as a "tourist destination" and "land of promises" transforms into a place parts of which reproduce segments of the Middle East (e.g. Wal-Mart and the *souq* in Amman) when experienced under conditions of permanent proximity. The change of attitudes to Arabness after 9/11 enhances the protagonists' awareness of

their ethnicity and compels them to relocate themselves to both America and the Middle East. The psychological and physical abuse they suffer comes as a result of both the larger political situation dominated by a growing sense of risk and growing panic, and by their unwillingness to relinquish the static, routinized patters of American life. In this sense, Halaby's novel argues vehemently against stasis that takes the form of desire to control events, lives and identities in the post-9/11 world. The crisis which the novel configures unfolds as the ensuing instability enhances the impulse for solidification in pursuit of more effective order. Halaby employs fluid topography to designate the problematic location of the post-9/11 Arab diaspora in the US in claims that borders, like rivers, are contingent, and unless both "river banks", both Arabness and Americanness, are negotiated in the Arab American identity, in the concomitance of their alluring (paradisal) and threatening (ghula) manifestations, a flow of violence may spill and consume minds and lives.

Chapter 5, **"Turning the Middle East Inside Out in Elif Shafak's novel *Honour*"**, reads analytically Shafak's work as a cross-border text that negotiates geographical, cultural and generational distance. Following her biographically determined formula of multi-connectedness which compares the migrant writer to a drawing compass – one leg rooted, the other constantly moving – I observe how the narrative perspective in the novel, while fixed on local, traditional definitions of "honour", also embodies a persistent movement in time, space and reasoning that reroutes them in cross-border reformulations. This transformation occurs as the Toprak family migrates from the Kurdish village beyond the banks of the Euphrates through Istanbul to London where they settle permanently and their displacement splits Pembe from her twin sister Jamila who remains in the village. Twinning, reverse migrations and mirrored experience complicate the traversed space rendering the Turkish-Kurdish-English whereabouts of the characters' displacements equally unstable and specularly conjoined. While the novel contributes to current trends in contemporary Turkish literature that seek to relocate the Turkish state and its contemporaneity by a postcolonial version of "writing back" to the discourses of its Kemalist self-westernisation, it is likewise concerned with the persistence of honour killings, exported through Middle Eastern diasporas beyond the Middle East. Thus, beyond the simplicity of a romantically reconstructed version of this region, I suggest that the novel should be read as a contemporary rewrite of early instructive texts of the type of "mirror-for-princes" that circulated between East and West. A particular group of them, the romances of Iskander (Alexander the Great) constitute an immediate reference to the novel whose Turkish title

coincides with the name of the protagonist Iskander/Iskender. From this perspective, the novel's sensitivity to deliberate silence, concealed crime and rumoured adultery acquires greater significance as these foreground the potential of the word, the power of stories and the disaster of miscommunication in a context that underscores both reverence to the creative/instructive role of language in Middle Eastern culture and the way it is employed to negotiate the distance between listening East and West.

The **Conclusion** retraces the discussed literary responses to border crossing to locate them against growing concerns about the "moving" Middle East. It ruminates on the oxymoronic tendencies to refer to this part of the world both as a rigid cultural enclosure and as a moving entity whose proximity has become tangibly threatening due to increased refugee migration and terrorist assaults. The conclusion equally insists on the necessity of further theoretical effort to understand the controversial position of borders as sites of interaction and to suggest when and where they should denote ultimate limits. As artistic and literary works represent samples of border space themselves, writing and reading the "Middle East" is indispensable in this process. In particular, migrant writing "within" and "beyond" borders traces meaningful routes of passage through risky space.

Notes

[1] For further detail, see Stephan Guth. *Borders and Beyond. Crossings and Transitions in Modern Arabic Literature*, 2011.

[2] See El-Enany's book *Arab Representations of the Occident. East-West Encounters in Arabic Fiction*, 2006.

CHAPTER ONE

BEYOND THE BANKS OF THE EUPHRATES: RIVERS AND BORDERS. TOWARDS A TOPOLOGY OF FLUCTUATION

In ancient times River Euphrates was called simply the River. The acknowledgement of its singularity does not only stem from the fact that regions of variable aridity like the one extending over the water-washed triangle of the Jordan, the Tigris and the Euphrates are umbilically tied to whatever durable presence of water may be found in their vicinity. The significance of waterscapes to parts of the earth where rain-reliant agriculture is a precarious and risky occupation has certainly contributed to the vitality and perseverance of stories that inscribe rivers in fictional or religious maps. A rather lyrico-conceptual turn of expression that will focalise the diverse points of discussion in the present research is that such stories continue to resonate in contemporary frameworks of map-making and map-reading. They have not only served to account for the geographical and historical identity of lands, peoples, their lifestyles, cultures and the interactions between them, but have also imprinted themselves in the way in which we attempt to figure out the world in our imagination. Hebrew stories told about the Euphrates testify to one such early form of spatial articulation that appears to resurface in contemporary debates on borders, their reality, fictionality, displacement or relocation. The story lurks behind Hebrew ethnic identity and the etymology of the very word *Hebrew*. It is told in the first chapters of the Old Testament, in the Book of Genesis.

The setting is the postdiluvian world. The waters of the great flood are restrained, new landscapes and people have emerged upon the face of the earth. To fulfil God's will, Abra(ha)m (who descends from Noah's eldest son Shem, holder of the greatest portion of paternal blessings) has to follow God's prescribed itinerary "from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee" (Genesis 12:1).[1] Following divine instructions, he leaves his father's homestead in Ur of the Chaldeans and migrates northward crossing the Euphrates on his way to Canaan (the Promised

Land) and Hebron (his preferred dwelling place). Midway through the journey, when he separates from his nephew Lot after arguments over grazing areas, Abraham (then Abram) gives him first choice and while Lot heads eastward for the plain of the Jordan and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abram settles under the oaks of Mamre in Hebron. It is there that God gives him and his wife new names (Abraham meaning "father of a multitude", Sarah – "princess"), and the status of progenitors of the Hebrew people (Genesis 17).[2]

The story has been widely read by Ancient history scholars and Biblical historians as an account that draws "cross-bearings" of the vague and elusive expanse of the "Middle East", but it is also suggestive of one of the earliest constructions of boundaries as both tangible and invisible lines. The borderline in this narrative coincides with the River and with the assumption that the Euphrates divides the space of Abraham's migration into the Promised Land (the land beyond the River that his posterity will inherit) and the lands on the other bank (that, by dint of the division, become the place of Otherness). The pervasiveness of the distinction goes deep enough to acquire emblematic significance in the etymology of Hebrew ethnicity – if we trace it in the Oxford English Dictionary, we will find that the term Hebrew is a derivative of Abraham's name, a long-lasting linguistic capsule that contains the story of his migration. This linguistic "scenario" comprises the following stages:

> Aramaic *ʿebrai*, corresponding to Hebrew *ʿibrī* 'a Hebrew', lit. 'one from the other side (of the river)'; < *ʿēber* the region on the other or opposite side; < *ʿābar* to cross or pass over. Compare the LXX, Gen. xiv. 13 Ἀβρὰμ ὁ περατής, 'Abram the passer-over' or 'immigrant', for Abrām *haʿibrī* 'Abram the Hebrew'. At the revival of learning the initial *H* was resumed after classical Latin in French and English. (OED)

Etymologically, deeply encoded in the word's layers of meaning is the idea of movement that involves border crossing and bears direct references to a parallel etymological landscape unfolding behind the concept of "migration" (from Latin *migrare* "to move from one place to another", or Greek *mei-* "to change, go, move").[3] Apparently, movement in these linguistic examples does not occur in a smooth space and necessitates transformation due to uneven experience and encounters with difference. In much later times, Abraham's itinerary lends shape to the peregrinations of one of the most mobile, violently persecuted and border-aware peoples in human history, whose traumatic experience has become synonymous with migration, nomadism and border crossing – the Hebrews.

I decided to begin my inquiry into a sample of literary responses to border crossing with less theoretical caution and much trust that the stories we tell about things are the basis of further reasoning and accumulation of evidence. Moreover, stories are like rivers – they gain water and speed, attract tributaries and flow into the wide expanse of seas and oceans that, like Salman Rushdie's "sea of stories",[4] produce new imaginative maps of the world. The literary pathways of migrant routes are like waterways that interact with the more arid forms of geographical, political and historical pronouncement – they displace firmly-anchored positions, transplant geographical locations into fictional cartographies of memories or expectations and graft sprouting new lands onto the stock of already existing ones. In spite of the implications of division in Abraham's river-crossing, the story of the crossing had itself "crossed" more than one cultural borderline before it was incorporated in the canonical text of the Scripture. Our further reasoning will likewise be guided by the conviction that telling and writing stories occurs on both sides of a symbolic River, or, more precisely, it is the River itself, the "riwāya" that shapes its banks and carries water to the lands beyond them.

1.1. What is there in a line?

The earliest creation stories claim the beginning of meaningful existence through processes of separation – the world comes into being through segmentation and compartmentalisation: heavens and earth, water and dry land, temporal segments of the daily round, living creatures and their capacity to distinguish "good" from "evil" are the outcome of such mythological cosmogonies. Mircea Eliade, eminent scholar of "primitive" cultures, concludes that claiming firmly-fixed whereabouts, shapes and positions in terms of space, time and moral stance is a characteristic stage in the development of early societies, one which is symptomatic of their sense of location indispensably linked to communal awareness and the perception of being and belonging:

> One of the outstanding characteristics of traditional societies is the opposition that they assume between their inhabited territory and the unknown and indeterminate space that surrounds it. The former is the world (more precisely, our world) […]; everything outside it is […] a sort of "other world", a foreign, chaotic space". (29)

Another branch of academic scholarship shifts from communal to individual self-location to explore the necessity of drawing specular lines to come to terms with ourselves as individuals. In his seminal study of the

formation of the human self, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan insists on the role of the images we construct of ourselves through assimilation and differentiation and regards the mirror as instrumental in this process.[5] The problem with Lacan's insightful contribution to the development of psychology resides in the specular borderlines that form when we identify with the image we see in the mirror – and which persists when we interact with others. More recent theoretical advances in psychology and philosophy have also concluded that borderlines can be comfortable confines – such as the carapace of the tortoise or the coiled retreat of the snail – but as far as we dwell or even journey enclosed within their limits we fail to see, experience and understand what lies on the other side of the borderline, beyond the symbolic river. This perspective overlaps with Syed Islam's perceptive identification of the *sedentary traveller*, i.e. someone who journeys haunted by "the morbid fear of encounter [and] moves in space either to seek confirmation of her/his egocentric self in the mirror of the other, or to capture the other in the paranoiac gesture of othering" (209). There is a *nomadic traveller*, too, who says "Yes to the other [...] overcoming the rigid boundary" (210). In effect, as Islam observes, both modes of travelling go hand-in-hand and grow inseparable as long as we are willing to undertake journeys, but depending on which one of them prevails the trajectory of the travelling subject changes as does the type of space traversed. If we try to represent the spatial configuration of the attempted movement on a flat surface, we will see how two different types of moving line take shape – the sedentary line is perforated, it consists of periodic stops reminiscent of the cross bearings on a route-map. This mode of advancing is less dynamic and can be visualised as an assembly of dots, being a sort of an aesthetic enterprise rather than a freely indulged sweeping movement. The sedentary traveller has already composed the route of his/her journey and follows the instructions of a mental map – a blueprint of preconceptions about "otherness" configured by invisible borderlines. The nomadic traveller, by contrast, moves along a continuous line whose twists and turns are unpredictable as the world s/he traverses comes into being in the very course of the journey.

Islam's ethical considerations about the travelling subject's self-sufficiency and/or ability to move beyond borders take most of their cues from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's philosophical inquiry into the way we imagine and experience space. In their seminal work *A Thousand Plateaus* they distinguish between two nominal types of space (de facto they seep into each other), sedentary (striated) and nomadic (smooth), and argue that they form around different types of borderlines that correspond

to the different types of fabric sedentary and nomadic peoples use for their clothes and tents:

> among sedentaries, clothes-fabric and tapestry-fabric tend to annex the body and exterior space, respectively, to the immobile house: fabric integrates the body and the outside into a closed space. On the other hand, the weaving of the nomad indexes clothing and the house itself to the space of the outside, to the open smooth space in which the body moves. (476)

Technologically, sedentary clothing is made out of fabric that interweaves threads in a solid but discontinuous texture. It resembles the point-to-point mode of sedentary travelling. Nomads, Deleuze and Guattari observe, are the inventors of felt – "a splendid insulator […] the raw material for tents, clothes, and armor among the Turco-Mongols" (476). Unlike the less smooth surface of sedentary fabric, felt is thick, homogeneous (through the entanglement of micro-fibres obtained by fulling) and extremely supple. Due to its flexibility, it protects against unfavourable weather conditions without impeding movement. Thus, it is largely preferred by nomadic tribes that traverse wide open spaces and are exposed to diverse weather extremes. Felt is the textile counterpart to the continuous line of the nomadic movement that, by virtue of its power of penetration, enables the moving subject to "thread" his/her way into the surrounding world.

Though Deleuze and Guattari's inspection of the way humans settle and move in space seems too abstract and is more likely to produce binary descriptions of that complex interaction, they do contribute significantly to contemporary discussions of borderlines and borderline conditions. For one thing, they do not see lines as separate from the subjects that produce, trace or cross them. Just as clothes or nomadic tents cling to the bodies of their owners and inhabitants, lines expand or retract with the intensity of our own sense of separation from or inclusion in the immense opportunities of movement space offers us. Moreover, the lines in Deleuze and Guattari's model of spatial self-location both forestall and promise integration – they bind space into the moving subject (in the sedentary mode of movement) and wrap the moving subject in space (in the nomadic scenario). Consequently, apart from being simply the contours of one mode of existence or another, lines weave tapestries of border space that flows in the conduits of movement, be it sedentary or nomadic.

Philosophical and profoundly abstract as it is, Deleuze and Guattari's theorisation of border experience borrows from anthropological lore and anthropology is a less preferred theoretical destination for scholars who remember its complicity with the colonial enterprise. Recently, however, this academic field has taken a turn that is much more receptive to the

general trends of exploring what lies beyond borderlines. Anthropology is a branch of studies that combines empirical, ontological and aesthetic considerations – a combination that may offer quite a few new pathways in the discussion of border experience. Borders are themselves both tangible and intangible lines; they can be drawn by hand by cartographers (nowadays usually printed) or imagined when we contemplate an expanse of diverse measure (or beyond measure). They can be observed and followed even after they have been removed for a long period of time (for instance, the persisting lines of colonial relations after decolonisation). Borderlines and the spaces they engender are actually consistent with the many other lines in our daily experience – physical and metaphysical, natural or constructed: the spectrum of light, the magnetic grid of the Earth, the indented coastlines or mountain ridges, the optically illusive skyline, the creases upon our palms, our pathways that overlap with, but often deviate from the conduits of streets and roads, to name just a few conspicuous examples. What matters for the purposes of the present critical investigation is that this great variety ranging from ancient runic inscriptions to music lines and the curved figures of children's drawings, suggests that lines are both organically bound to the world we inhabit and constructed or reclaimed by humans in an attempt at self-location through social, political, artistic, religious and other types of activity.

The nature and presence of lines is beautifully studied by social anthropologist Tim Ingold of the University of Aberdeen. In his innovative and discerning treatise, entitled *Lines: a Brief History*, he not only examines the different ways in which lines emerge and interact, but also makes an inventory of the more or less permanent and visible ones, the lines that have been existing since time immemorial and those that have become invisible and need to be remembered and retraced, those that are uncomfortable, but not easily removable, as well as those that are drawn throughout our living time, when life casts its networks of trajectories and relationships upon the face of the earth. In his far-reaching research, Ingold revisits Deleuze and Guattari's patterns of space albeit from a different vantage point. In place of the sedentary line he suggests the thread, "a filament of some kind, which may be entangled with other threads or suspended between points in three-dimensional space" (41); and in the place of the nomadic line, there is the trace, "any enduring mark left in or on a solid surface by a continuous movement" (43). He likewise proposes that threads can turn into traces, and traces into threads, and their metamorphoses change the substance of the surfaces linked to them, "whenever threads turn into traces, surfaces are formed, and whenever traces turn into threads, they are dissolved" (2). The situation becomes

more complicated, Ingold remarks, as habitable space and even "wild", "uncultivated" areas that we easily imagine as "untrodden" turn out to be a web of innumerable visible and invisible lines. Once again, like Deleuze and Guattari, Ingold comes out with two different profiles of the human subject who moves forward through the tangles of space. According to the type of the movement attempted, he distinguishes between the transported traveller whose journey corresponds to that of the sedentary subject, and the wayfarer who resembles the nomadic traveller.[6] The transported traveller does not seem to move at all – s/he symbolically cuts the threads that his/her movement spins between the stops of the journey and is preoccupied with its numerous arrivals rather than with what melds them into one flow. The wayfarer indulges in the journey to such an extent that s/he becomes "instantiated in the world as a line of travel" (75-6). Ingold illustrates the nomadic pathway of displacement with an example from the Batek natives of Malaysia:

> Batek women from Pahang […] say that the roots of the wild tubers they collect for food 'walk' as humans and other animals do. If this idea seems odd to us, it is only because we are inclined to reduce the activity of walking to the mechanics of locomotion, as though the walker were a passenger in his own body and carried by his legs from point to point. For the Batek, however, walking is a matter of laying a trail as one goes along. And this is exactly what roots do as they issue forth along lines of growth, threading their ways through the soil. The wayfarer's trails, and the trailing root, are phenomena of the same kind. (76)

Unlike the sedentary mode of travelling, which immobilises the moving subject by encapsulating him/her in a medium of transportation, nomads or wayfarers imprint themselves in their "trails" that penetrate surfaces and reshape them. If sedentaries coil the threads that spin the direction of their course around themselves, nomads become embodied in their traces that intersect other traces in the mesh-like space of the journey.

Inspiring and poetic as it may be, this vision needs to come to terms with the limits of its aesthetic indulgence. In the course of history, the itineraries of transported and wayfaring travellers have produced the ambiguous stance of the migrant who not only crosses borderlines, but inhabits them; not only dwells in borderlands, but *is* a borderland. The contention, that will persistently regulate the direction of this reasoning, questions much of what has been said about the rigidity, permeability or semi-permeability of borders and border space. For one thing, it is obvious that borderlines, ranging from filaments to the great Chinese Wall, are dry traces and threads. Even Ingold's brilliant study testifies to the reductive thinking such assumption indulges – if the world were a tangle of threads

and traces, however invisible they are, we would sooner or later find ourselves tightly packed and immobilised in its webs. Like most of the theoretical models of the world, this one is a stylised template that relies on restrictive figures to explain what lies beyond their limits. Aware of the fact that my own work risks undertaking a similar theoretical enterprise, I refer to Ingold's pattern arguing that lines and borderlines shape and are shaped by individual pathways or collective pronouncements that cannot be contained within generalised statements. At times, such lines solidify due to violent oppression and we fail to do justice to their itineraries if we consider them as reductive and expulsive only. Thus, the present book finds much promise in narratives that "write back" to trauma, retread broken paths and reconstruct identities in spite of the rifts that run along personal and collective experience.

Turning again to the example of the Euphrates river, if we look at the river's physiography, the study of its physical parameters, we will learn that since Antiquity it has been the longest river in Asia; that, along with the Tigris, it constitutes the basic source of water and irrigation in the region; and that its riparian territory has changed so much that artificial water canals and barrages have even managed to conduct its waters to the lower stream of the Tigris to ensure better water supply. Nowadays, ecologists are concerned with the overexploitation of the river sections in the guise of a growing total of thirty-two dams and barrages with the most extensive hydro-engineering taking place in Turkey. The Euphrates has likewise been at the core of numerous conflicts between the riparian states having stakes in its streams – Turkey, Syria and Iraq; and, since 2013 the forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) have sought strategic strongholds along the riverside. Contemporary writer of Turkish descent Elif Shafak opens her novel *Honour* with a retrospective description of a Kurdish village near the Euphrates in 1953 and ends it, alternating between London and the village, in almost the same place some forty years later. In the course of time, the setting, which had once been a "rugged, remote […] village", lying far from "the outside world" in "its sheath of seclusion" (6), retains its "cloak of calmness" (291) only to become a military line of Kurdish insurgents and government soldiers. Diana Abu-Jaber, another contemporary migrant writer from the Middle East, locates the Euphrates of her novel *Crescent* beneath the ballistic lines of exploding rockets that "come from over the river, across the fields, from the other side of an invisible border, from another ancient country called Iran" (15). The latter textual example refers to the war between Iran and Iraq, and revisits the Biblical story of the Euphrates whose banks appear to be the borderlines of separate worlds. The distance between them cannot

be negotiated unless the River is "passed over", i.e. unless the traces of the exploding rockets are "trailed" in a reciprocal redemptive movement that melts their "pinwheels of fire" (15) into a continuous itinerary between both sides of the river.

This train of paradigms and examples shows that borders are much like rivers – they change in the course of time, they can be steered into new directions by those who cross them along sedentary and nomadic lines, and they can be "consumed" by the travelling subject and transformed into inward spaces of expansion or retraction.[7] Whatever the case, the conviction remains that borderlines, like riverbeds, are reservoirs of both anxiety and hope – often they cannot contain rising waters that spill over their banks. For the inhabitants of arid regions where river levels rise strikingly in the early snow-melting season and floods coincide with intensive agricultural activity, overflowing water is a sign of blessing, a proof that everything seeming dead will come to life again. For the purposes of the present investigation, such tropes of fluidity will operate as a constant reference in the discussion of borderlines that coincide with migrant routes and enclose border spaces that overflow them.

1.2. Borderline transfigurations of the Middle East

Water has always been a reference in designations of the dry portions of the earth. Thus the Ancient Greeks would call the fertile land patch populated by the early world's powerful empires *Mesopotamia*,[8] the Land between the Rivers (the Tigris and the Euphrates) while claiming that their own location was the centre of the world – the *Mediterranean* (meaning "sea in the middle of the earth").[9] The Greeks believed their world consisted of the mainland of Greece, the Aegean Islands, the Greek-colonised lands to the north and west, and the regions beyond, reaching to parts of Asia and Africa. They were likewise aware of their borderline location and though we owe them the founding myth of Europe, it can be argued that the Hellenic world's attempts at self-location were less self-centred than the ventures of its successors. While the Ancient Greeks did espouse a sharp dichotomisation between their land and the lands beyond their borders, making some disparaging statements on the inhabitants of the latter, they appeared more eager to attribute their superiority to the interaction of the "East" and "West." Even if we take a look at the mythological account of Europe's birth, we will see that *Europa* enters her historical and geographical location as the daughter of the king of Tyre (a city-state on the Asian Mediterranean coast, in what is today's Lebanon). And, as Zachary Lockman points out, Aristotle wrote in the fourth century

BCE that the Greeks are "neither European nor Asian but rather […] a distinct people who by virtue of their intermediate location between the two continents were endowed with the best qualities of both" (12).

Nowadays, history books and research begin their accounts of the history of the world with an appreciation of the formative role of the "East" in the growth and development of its "Western" counterpart. Elusive and often misplaced, the notions of "East" and "West", adopted as cultural labels, continue to persist in the academic vocabulary due to their geographical convenience and the burden of accumulated meanings they carry with them. This section of my work will dwell on the geographical, historical, political and cultural location of the entities that inhabit these fictional and actual positions drawing on Lockman's study *Contending Visions of the Middle East* to take account of the fluctuating borderlines shaped by changing interpretations of "East" and "West." Lockman's analysis will be of help because it is acutely sensitive to the disproportion of designations and actual conditions that has confined the overflowing significance of the Middle East to narrow stereotypical paradigms.

At the same time, referring to Ingold's assertion that lines (and borderlines) can, actually, never be clear-cut structures and always manifest themselves in the form of closely-knit tangles; and trusting the river-stream model of borderline fluctuation, it would be a major omission to disentangle the "Western" lines configuring the "East" from those drawn by the occasions of its self-representation. Borderlines are, above all, sites that generate contact and interaction, in the course of which they may assume new forms, become more rigid or flexible, or spill over into larger deltas of tributaries.

The present book is held together by the conviction that the most significant transfigurations – extensions, retractions, superimpositions, fortification and displacement of borderlines – occur when the mentally generated invisible lines that delineate them become more or less durable traces and trails upon power-contested territories. Postcolonial studies, a branch of academic investigation that developed in the late decades of the twentieth century in response to the processes of decolonisation, have largely been guided by Michel Foucault's understanding of the role of *discourse* in shaping individual and collective self-awareness and perception of difference.[10] A discourse, he claims, is a statement subjected to control (by some pervading political, social, cultural, ideological premises) similar to Jeremy Bentham's invisible presence of power in the disciplinary mechanism of the Panopticon.[11] Like the inhabitants of this utopic structure who may not know that they are closely observed, we think, act, and dwell in a world thinly veiled by an all-pervasive web of

power relations. This web streams into imagined or empirically proved, creatively questioned, rejected or asserted invisible lines that draw deep traces upon tangible reality. Therefore, one of the greatest absurdities migration exposes is the imagined tangibility of the "beyond", meaning that it disagrees with how division promises difference as a way out of bordered confinement. Border crossing induces the more perceptive vision that the destination binding our journeys is on neither side of the line; that once we step out of our beginnings we realise that "here" does not lead to "there", or the other way round; that their location does not depend as much on intrinsic distinction, as on which side of the borderline we make our pronouncements. The present investigation adopts "East", "Middle East", "Orient", "Levant", "West", "Occident" as designations produced by numerous power conditions, stereotypical vision and variable geographic perspectives; but employs these designations in the awareness that they are produced by reciprocal gazes cast over from the opposite banks of one and the same "river".

1.2.1. A matter of proximity and distance

Going back to where we started this discussion, the earliest accounts of division (and processes of borderline formation) in the Middle East reach us through epic texts like the Hebraic Old Testament, along with some of the very few recorded poems of Persian minstrels, Ferdowsī, the greatest epic poet of Persia's Shāh-nāmeh ("Book of Kings"), and later on, with the proverbial conquests of Alexander the Great and their repercussions in Hellenic texts and the subsequent rewrites. As has already been mentioned, due to our distanced historical perspective, but also to the fact that it was the place of far-flung empires, the world back then would seem to us much more compact and "bridged." It consisted of regions and their cultures that would naturally flow into and out of each other producing a border space of shared history, topoi, legends and epic accounts.

A curious example of borderline interaction in the region is the transfiguration of stories about Alexander the Great and the magnitude of his rule in Persian, Hellenic Alexander romances and Persian-Arabic historiographies. At times, he is represented as the destroyer of Zoroastrian priesthood and culture, and a great enemy to the Persian world, but other accounts, mostly Hellenic and Muslim ones, refashion him into an embodiment of exemplary rule. Muslims, Josef Wiesenhöfer suggests, were particularly grateful for his intervention in Zoroastrism, which they interpreted as an act to combat idolatry and an initiative towards establishing the "true" faith.[12] Early in history, East and West took shape

as both rivals and complementaries, even possible partners that borrowed from each other's means of self-assertion.

In the time of the crusades, military lines established between Christians and Muslims produced visions of the East as an unanimous whole that could easily be identified as one of the many pagan communities threatening to invade and "contaminate" Christianity. Due to historical invention (fostered by hearsay and fantasy mixed with sporadic scraps of accurate information), general disengagement and the authoritative pronouncements of the Catholic Church, the East became less visible to Catholic Europe than it used to be earlier in history. Moreover, its presence drew lines of discord between eastern and western Europe – while the south-eastern regions (the Balkans) had to face the tangible hostility of the expanding Ottoman empire, western parts were doing their best to "theorise" the enemy, its culture and beliefs, in a way that would certify its secondary position to Christianity and European culture.

After the Crusades that, in spite of mobilising the disparate segments of the former Roman empire, failed to evict Islam from the centre of eastern Christianity – Constantinople – the Muslim East not only moved westward on the geographical maps, but started intensive political, diplomatic and military relations with the West, in the course of which it rapidly became an overexploited site in the imaginative, cartographic, scientific (and pseudo-scientific), religious and political life of western Europe. Meanwhile, the European South-East and, later, for a short time, some central parts, flowed into the Muslim East and remained there for the centuries to come. As a result, the geographical territory of the Ottoman empire, measured at the apogee of its lifespan (at the time of Süleyman I the Magnificent's rule from 1494 to 1566) included twenty to thirty million people on a territory containing parts of Europe, the whole of Asia Minor, parts of Asia and Africa.

Back in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the time of the Crusades, the East was largely produced as a locus with uncertain and conflicting boundaries. It can be argued that most of them were drawn along sedentary lines and most of the perspectives on this part of the world were produced by "transported travellers." The crusaders were "transported" by their mission to preserve the Christian Holy Lands from hostile incursions while the church scribes and those willing to know more about the people that became their unexpected and threatening proximity, produced a rumoured, more distant and hence less tangible "East."

Most of the historical representations of the East and Islam were, likewise, guided by the political and economic course of border negotiations. As the Ottoman empire was on its way to become a viable

rival to European imperial rule and took hold of the trade routes which connected western Europe with the far-eastern lands of endemic spices and commodities, "[t]he merchants of the great Italian commercial city-states, especially Venice and Genoa, who travelled across the Mediterranean seeking Asian products for resale in western Europe were […] confronted with a monopoly they could not evade or break" (Lockman 49). The economic and political growth of the neighbouring empire, coupled with the decline of European social, political and intellectual life in the Middle Ages, transformed West-East relations into a strategy of communication across more flexible borderlines. Understandably, flexibility was adopted by western Europe's diplomatic attempts to "know" the strength and weaknesses of its rival. These attempts included examination of the political system of Ottoman rule in which power, concentrated in the figure of the sultan and his princes, was distributed according to merits of loyalty rather than hereditary rights.

The time when Ottoman borderlines almost reached into the heart of continental Europe articulated some of the relatively dispassionate, objective and sometimes even admiring figures of the Ottoman state and system of rule that, as Lockman observes, set the beginning of

> a distinct branch of the humanities whose focus was the study of the Orient – which initially meant virtually all of Asia, from the lands along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean (which Europeans often called "the Levant", derived from the French term for "land where the sun rises") all the way to India and China. Much later, in the nineteenth century, the specialized field of scholarly learning which studied the languages, religions, histories and cultures of that Orient would come to be called "Orientalism". (44)

As soon as the East entered scholarly discussions as the Orient, even at such early stages of its configuration (fifteenth-sixteenth centuries), its imagined homogeneity became subject to re-evaluation and, subsequently, erosion, till the moment when, much later, after the dissolution of the Ottoman empire and European decolonisation, the traumatic post-war redrawal of political, ethnic, gender and racial borderlines and the development of postcolonial critical paradigms would produce a kaleidoscopic multitude of "Easts", "Middle Easts" and "Wests", dispersed throughout individual stories and experiences.

1.2.2. Fact and fiction

The process of "breaking down" the generalised homogeneity of the East was still latent in the scholarly thought and literary works of sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While western Europe became more mobile, intellectually inquisitive, politically strengthened and economically prosperous (due to its access to colonial riches and industrial advancement), the Ottoman world started declining, worn out by its giant territory, accelerating disintegration and weak political rule. In due time, European geographical perspective as well as its economic dependence on Ottoman monopoly of trade with the Far East underwent significant transformation. The awareness that there were other lands on the globe and other routes to the lands of spices (the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa, the Indian Ocean, India, the Spice Islands, and the Americas) rendered the world much wider than it had been imagined and the Ottoman lands, by then western Europe's only mighty rival, were eagerly relocated into an increasingly shrinking segment of the emerging expanse. At the same time, European expansion was mechanically propelled by the proliferation of old and new lines of power, invisible filaments and deeply-burrowed trails that left its expanded territory scarred and its internal political life dominated by rivalries between newly-emerging colonial empires.

Some of the most conspicuous instances of mismatch between the actual state of affairs and its more or less fictionalised representation have generated a multitude of historical accounts, scientific reports, stories and literary writings that rendered so many variable versions of their subject, that finally a proliferation of "Orients" flooded European space. Among them, we can discern some early attempts to "revive" the Hellenic model of European freedom and eastern despotism;[13] others that trace European racial superiority under a "West and the rest" scenario;[14] those seeking to displace the "East" from its original whereabouts and transplant it into the western world as a sort of an exotic "looking-glass" or "lens" through which one could better see the fault lines of western social and political life (the Enlightenment work of Montesqieu's *Lettres persanes* and the load of similar writings following in its wake); as well as works that leave web-like trails in the course of cultural interaction (the *Arabian Nights*). The enhanced movement of people in both geographical directions also produced an amount of travelogues. However, most of the travellers who wrote them appear to have journeyed as sedentaries enclosed by their own predetermined itineraries – most often visiting the Gospel lands, the sublime destination of their journeys which, understandably, put other places, people and experiences into the background. Most of what we