

Crime Fiction in and around the Eastern Mediterranean

Edited by
Börte Sagaster, Martin Strohmeier,
and Stephan Guth



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Studien zur Literatur in der islamischen Welt

Herausgegeben von
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The sign on the cover, designed by Anwārī al Ḥusaynī, symbolizes a scale.

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Introduction

Börte Sagaster and Martin Strohmeier

In Western literature, crime and fiction are old (and not even strange) bedfellows. From the beginning of modern novel writing in the 18th century, novels by such writers as Henry Fielding and Daniel Defoe, dealt with criminality, one of the most pervasive features of urban life. The concerns of fiction reflected a widespread perception that there was no force—certainly not the judicial system—capable of preventing, detecting or adequately punishing criminals.

The early 19th century saw, on the one hand, the growth of a professional police-force. On the other hand, writers' fascination with the milieus of criminals and prisons often bordered on identification with the criminal. Charles Dickens is the most prominent example of this tendency.

Also in the 19th century, the detective novel developed as a distinct literary form. Edgar Allan Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" from 1841 is usually considered as the prototype of the genre. Its protagonists—usually not members of the police force—are called in to solve mystery crimes whereby they make possible the apprehension of criminals and allow justice to prevail. Detective novels quickly became immensely popular. It has been suggested that there are two main reasons for their popularity: 1) The reader sees his anxieties portrayed and resolved (as the detective allows the social order to return); 2) Detective novels developed a set of conventions centered around the rational explanation of the crime puzzle which allowed—or rather expected—the reader to participate in the intellectual gratification of solving the mystery.

Since that time, crime fiction has remained one of the most popular genres of literature, evolving into many different subgenres, foremost among them the thriller. The detective story, though perhaps somewhat less successful than the thriller in terms of marketability, has stepped out from a genre of popular fiction which was more or less neglected by literary critics into the realm of high-brow literature as writers such as Umberto Eco, Kazuo Ishiguro, Julian Barnes and Orhan Pamuk, incorporated elements of the detective story into their novels. The thriller, although long dismissed as escapist literature, has recently gained acceptance in literary circles. This has caused great debates, but defenders of thrillers argue that they deal with contemporary problems, fears and anxieties, in a way that "literary" novels cannot or do not.

In terms of social history, the emergence of crime fiction in the West has been associated with the development of the civil state under the rule of law, in particular

setting up police forces to combat crime. There are other factors such as the rationalism of Enlightenment and, with a view to the method of detection, the rise of scientific thought in the 19th century. Furthermore, a fear of encroachments of an all-powerful state on the one hand, and on the other hand, the protection of the individual and his property have been seen as contributing to the emergence and rise of crime fiction. But it is not clear whether these factors are causes for the emergence of the genre or simply concomitant phenomena.

Things become even more complicated regarding the emergence of the genre in the eastern Mediterranean. The above-mentioned factors, i.e. the civil state along with industrialization and the capitalist mode of production, did not develop in the same way in the eastern Mediterranean as in the West, if at all. Therefore, a “belated” arrival of the genre in the eastern Mediterranean could be put forward. However, the discussion about an autochthonous modernity of the eastern Mediterranean, contemporary but independent from Europe, merits further investigation.

Whatever the origins of crime fiction were in the West and the eastern Mediterranean, there seems to be a consensus that crime fiction in the literatures of the eastern Mediterranean region did not start before the first decades of the 20th or even the second half of the 20th century. However, there seems to be a remarkable exception in that the first Ottoman-Turkish crime novel was penned by Ahmet Midhat Efendi in 1884. After a modest start in Hebrew literature in the 1930’s and small-scale production during the following decades, the genre has gained an enormous popularity in Israel since the 1980’s. Although the famed Arabian Nights included crime narratives and there have been translations of Western crime fiction from an early date, the emergence of an indigenous genre is basically a phenomenon of the second half of the 20th century in Arabic literature. In contrast, crime fiction in Persian is almost non-existent up to the present day. Crime fiction made its appearance in modern Greek literature in the 1930’s and has developed into a major market force since the late 1980’s.

Against this background the essays in this volume seek to address the role of crime fiction in and around the Eastern Mediterranean. As part of the trend towards globalization of crime fiction, a growing interest of writers in the genre can be observed in the region. When we developed the idea for a conference on “Crime Fiction in the Eastern Mediterranean” which resulted finally in the publication of this volume, our starting point was the observation we had made on the literary developments in Turkey, where crime fiction has become a major literary genre during the last 15 to 20 years. We asked ourselves how the genre is perceived in other regions and countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, whether it underwent a similar development there, transforming itself from a genre of ‘popular literature’ to a genre that is highly acclaimed by literary critics. Authors like Petros Markaris (Greece), Ahmet Ümit (Turkey), Yasmina Khadra (Algeria/France), Driss Chraïbi (Morocco, d. 2007) and Batya Gur (Israel, d. 2005) have gained international reputation partly through translations, partly because they write in a western

language. Other authors writing in their native languages for the local market are almost unknown to an international audience. The essays in this volume refer to a wide range of Eastern Mediterranean crime fiction authors, investigating their literature from different angles:

In his article “Vertigo and The Dove’s Necklace as *romans noirs*: a hypothesis on Arabic crime fiction,” Alessandro Buontempo proposes to resolve the question of whether or not there is an Arabic crime fiction by examining two novels of the last decade which are considered literary and contain many elements of crime fiction. He suggests that both novels should be classified and read as *roman noir*, a subgenre of crime fiction which emphasizes the social context in which crime is committed rather than a particular structure. In a *roman noir* the crime is not presented as a riddle to be solved. The whodunit takes backstage to the questions How? and Why?

Vertigo (Firtigū) (2007) by the Egyptian writer Aḥmad Murād is a critique of the Mubarak regime. The narrator of the story has accidentally witnessed the murder of two prominent tycoons as well as his best friend in a ritzy Cairo bar. In the hero’s attempt to discover who is responsible for the crime, he is confronted with a tightly woven network of corrupt politicians, illegal businessmen and complicit secret service as well as the press which protects these elements by not exposing their machinations to the public.

The Dove’s Necklace (Tawq al-ḥamāma) (2010) by the Saudi Arabian writer Raḡā’ ʿĀlim deals with the themes of women’s identity, violence and the destruction of the historic identity of old Mecca by ruthless businessmen. A female body is found in a dilapidated part of town and inspector Qaḥṭānī must try to discover the identity of the woman, by interviewing the local inhabitants. Just as the police inspector is on the brink of discovery, the case is taken from him. He resigns and sets out on his own as a private detective.

In her article “Law, Crime and Society in the Middle East,” Silvia Tellenbach is interested in the degree to which crime novels of the Middle East reflect crime and the legal systems of their countries. In terms of crime statistics (concerning individuals) homicide is much lower than could be expected, due to religious, family and broader social control. Thus, murder is not an object of fear as it has been in countries with an over 200 year history of crime fiction. Moreover, when there is a murder, detection is not usually necessary as the identity of the perpetrator is well-known. This is one factor which has an impact on the relative scarcity of crime fiction in the Middle East.

Another factor is the negative image of the police who are themselves embroiled in corruption and are perceived as “solving” cases by torture, rather than through established practices of detection. Therefore, a fictional police detective on the side of justice cannot be an appealing or plausible figure.

The legal systems of Middle Eastern countries have been reformed on paper, limiting the powers of the police and secret service. However, in practice citizens are

subjected to the autocratic will of police and judges. The greatest concern of ordinary people in the Middle East is not the potential violence of their fellow citizens, but rather the pervasive corruption and nepotism which allow the powerful to elude the law. Freedom of speech is limited due to intimidation. Tellenbach quotes a character in a novel (*Die dunkle Seite der Liebe*, “The Dark Side of Love”) by the German-Syrian writer Rafik Schami: “Knowledge is a lock, the key of which is a question, but in this country you are not allowed to ask questions. Therefore...in this country there is no such thing as a decent criminal novel. Criminal novels thrive on questions.”

In his article “Lies and Deceptions: Saint Janjah, Social Critique, and the New Arabic Police Novel,” Jonathan Smolin points out that not only is there very little crime fiction in Arabic, but also there is little genre literature, such as science fiction or romance. For most of the 20th century, social realism has been the dominant mode of Arabic literature. Moreover, the choice of a police detective as hero contradicts the widespread perception that the police are less interested in fighting crime or ensuring the safety of the public than in defending the establishment.

Despite these constraints, a police novel was published in Morocco in 1963, in a period of intense optimism about the future political development of the state. Not until the mid-1990s did a new police novel appear in Morocco. Smolin attributes this occurrence to the climate of reform, the development of crime journalism and the trial of a policeman which engendered public debate about the role of the police.

Smolin examines two novels, each co-authored by Miloudi Hamdouchi and Abdelilah Hamdouchi. In both novels the protagonists are the same, but the mood and themes are quite different. Whereas the first novel, *The Blind Whale*, explores the effects of globalization and international crime networks on the country, the second novel, *Saint Janjah*, is permeated on every level with deception. The criminal, the victim, the press and the police investigator use deception to achieve their aims. When the crime is solved, the murderer receives only a short sentence, due to his prominence, which has arisen largely as the result of a favourable sensationalist press. The justice system and the press are depicted as deeply enmeshed in criminality.

Roger Celestin examines in his article “Postcolonial slumming angels: Driss Chraïbi’s Inspector Ali and Yasmina Khadra’s Commissaire Llob” two writers from the Maghreb who write crime fiction, though not exclusively. Both Driss Chraïbi (Morocco) and Yasmina Khadra (Algeria) have created police inspectors like Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe and use many of the structures of hard-boiled crime fiction. The social and political contexts the writers refer to are devoid of democratic institutions and are pervaded by the privileges of the upper classes and a corrupt ruling elite. Both inspectors have lost any illusions they might have had about reform in society; yet, neither has become cynical or lost his integrity. Khadra’s Commissaire Llob and Chraïbi’s Inspector Ali are private eyes living under corrupt

and authoritarian regimes. Through their protagonists and their investigations, the authors expose and denounce the lack of justice in their societies. Both protagonists refer wistfully to a lost past. Whereas Khadra's Llob is nostalgic for the pre-colonial past and the heroic struggle against colonialism, Inspector Ali yearns for the Islamic past before it was contaminated by western influence.

In the first part of his article "Thus ruled the Court (*Hukm al-'adāla*): A Collection of True Criminal Cases from Syria Turned into Narratives," Stephan Guth discusses certain elements of crime fiction in medieval Arabic *adab* literature. From the late 19th century translations of western crime novels were introduced as part of the *nahda*, the modernizing project of Arab intellectuals. While the reading public bought the novels of such authors as Doyle, Christie, Chandler and Hammett, it would seem that crime novels were read as portraying a better world in which a detective could search for the truth and restore order.

In the second part of his article Guth, searching for evidence of crime fiction in Syria, discovered a collection of authentic crime stories which were immensely popular in Syria, first in radio broadcasts, then in print, and finally in a television series. The crime stories were meant to be entertaining as well as edifying.

Guth discusses and contrasts the narrative methods of the radio and published stories, chronological presentation, suspense and the different levels of language: vernacular or high Arabic employed to reinforce social and moral values. He claims that the written medium still has preserved a sediment of the age-old idea of *adab* which demands a certain "politeness" and, hence, observance of taboos and genre rules from the writer, while broadcast media and film are freer and therefore produce more lively and enthralling crime fiction.

Panagiotis Agapitos' article "Bloody metalanguage? Crime fiction in Greece, 1991-2001" deals with crime fiction in Greece in a recent decade. As in the Middle East and North Africa, Greek readers became acquainted with crime fiction through translated novels. By the 1950s, however, original Greek crime novels were sold in cheap editions. During the junta this development was stunted, not to be revived until the 1990s with the work of Markaris and Apostolidis who had previously translated crime fiction. The book market since then has expanded and crime fiction is now recognized as serious literature.

Agapitos finds three characteristics of Greek crime fiction: social and political criticism, a traditional sense of honor, and the emphasis on food as an essential attribute of Greek society. Agapitos observes an excessive use of sex and violence and a strong misogynist attitude of much Greek crime fiction. In this way they often resemble sensationalist journalism.

Crime fiction in the neighbouring country of Greece, Turkey, is investigated in Wolfgang Scharlipp's article on "Subgenres in Turkish Crime Fiction." In the introductory part of his essay, Scharlipp refers to the problematic of an international

terminology of crime fiction literature, emphasizing its indistinct boundaries. He then turns to the topic of Turkish crime fiction genres, starting with the history of the detective novel in Turkey: The detective novel was first known in the 19th century Ottoman Empire through translations from the French and English, followed later by native productions. Scharlipp first considers several subgenres of Turkish crime fiction like the “gentleman gangster stories” which appeared at the very beginning of the Turkish Republic. Turkish “hard-boiled” fiction and the “roman jeu” soon followed. The latter he considers the preferred genre of Turkish women writers. Finally, he turns to Turkish crime fiction in the 1990s and later. During this period, crime fiction as social criticism as well as postmodern crime fiction with supernatural elements became popular in Turkey. Turkish crime fiction expanded its geographical and thematic space also to Central Europe through the works of writers with a migrant background. Concluding his article, Scharlipp points again to the blurring boundaries of all the subgenres mentioned, which should therefore not be regarded as a rigid scholarly classification, “but rather as a helpful guideline.”

Zeynep Tüfekçioğlu’s article “Let’s Say a Little about What’s There: Contemporary Turkish Crime Fiction and Its Literary Criticism” is divided into three parts. In the first part, she gives an overview of the current critical literature on crime fiction. In the second part she turns to Turkish literary criticism, noting that crime fiction was generally ignored by the critics for a long time. She points out the two extreme positions in Turkish literary criticism regarding modern Turkish literature: The first assumes that what is original is in the West (thus seeing the early Turkish novel as belated, unoriginal and inferior), while the second firmly insists on the authenticity of Turkish literature. As a consequence, Tüfekçioğlu argues, Turkish crime fiction remained undiscovered by the critics. While the first group ignored it as ‘simple’ and an ‘imitation’ of Western crime fiction, the second attempted to prove the authenticity of Turkish literature, focusing on a limited number of “highbrow” literary works. The investigation of popular literature remained marginal. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink the question of literary criticism in Turkey. In the third part of the article, Tüfekçioğlu proposes investigation methods for further research and underlines her arguments with examples from Turkish crime fiction literature. As crime fiction became a global narrative form in the 20th century, international theories are suitable to investigate this genre in its national forms. She concludes that as contemporary Turkish crime fiction discusses the cultural context of Turkish society, it is useful to synthesize textual and cultural analysis. Cultural narratology may thus be the most fruitful method of analysis for Turkish crime fiction.

The cultural reading Tüfekçioğlu suggests has been applied in Karin Schweissgut’s article on “Religious themes in Turkish crime literature.” Schweissgut’s article is a case study on one novel by the Turkish crime novel writer Mehmet Murat Somer. It deals with the religious themes in his book *Peygamber Cinayetleri* (“Prophet Murders”), which is the first book in a series of six novels that are all set in

Istanbul's transvestite scene. The detective of the book, a transvestite himself, has to solve here a case of murders in which the victims are all transvestites whose male names have a biblical or Qur'anic background. The religious knowledge with which the detective is finally able to solve the case, however, is not based on a deep understanding of Islam and Christianity but is rather pseudo-knowledge from movies of the 1960s that he has watched: "That not the sacred texts but computerized film versions form the basis of the narrator's religious knowledge is, however, important to the narrator's characterisation. It indicates that he is a modern personage with a consumer lifestyle." Detailed religious knowledge does not really matter for the concerns of this novel. In the course of her study, Schweissgut demonstrates that the author's foremost aim is to condemn the use of religious taboos to marginalize homosexuals in Turkey.

The last article in this volume is dedicated to Cyprus as a setting for Eastern Mediterranean crime fiction. Börte Sagaster compares in "Cyprus as A Crime Scene: Paris Aristides' *The Viper's Kiss* and Hasan Doğan's *Murder on the Lost Island*" two novels, one by a Cypriot Greek and the other by a Turkish writer, which are both set in Cyprus after the partition of the island in 1974. While the Greek story (Paris Aristides, "The Viper's Kiss") takes place in the Greek part of Cyprus, the Turkish novel (Hasan Doğan, "Murder on the Lost Island") is set in the Turkish part. Sagaster discovers some striking similarities between the two. Both novels belong to the hard-boiled crime fiction genre, and in both cases the detective comes as a stranger to Cyprus from the Greek respectively Turkish mainland. Another striking common feature is that the villain is a local Greek respectively Turkish woman. In both novels manifest social critique of post-partition society. Looking at the identity of the detective figures in both novels, Sagaster points in the second part of her article to the underlying message of cultural hegemony in both texts. Contrary to their American counterparts, the Greek and Turkish detectives do not function as cultural agents who mediate between different social and ethnic groups, as has been shown for American hard-boiled fiction, but as representatives of the two "mainlands" of Cyprus, Greece and Turkey, who aim to impose their cultural values on a society which they perceive, after all, as more or less different from—yet dependent on—their own.

The articles gathered in the present volume are too heterogeneous to give us a full picture of the crime fiction landscape in and around the eastern Mediterranean, and geographically there are definitely gaps. While the crime fiction of Israel and Lebanon is not represented, crime fiction in Turkey figures in four articles. This imbalance may be due at least partly to the present situation in Turkey where crime fiction—as Scharlipp's article demonstrates—has been transformed during the last two decades from a genre of minor importance, which was considered "lowbrow" literature, to a major literary genre. However, it is probably not wrong to claim that the genre of crime fiction with its numerous subgenres is becoming increasingly

well-established in many areas of the Eastern Mediterranean. Particularly the hard-boiled school seems to have here many followers, as four of the essays in this volume indicate (Buontempo, Scharlipp, Sagaster, Celestin). The tough and manly “private eye” who fights against a corrupt political system, social grievances and violence—while the reader is ‘en passant’ provided through the detective’s visits to different social milieus with knowledge on the local setting and society—seems to be a particularly attractive figure for many Eastern Mediterranean crime fiction writers. The term “Mediterranean Noir,” which has been used as a term so far mainly with reference to hard-boiled fiction of the Western Mediterranean (Italian, French, Spanish, but also Israeli authors),¹ should therefore perhaps be reconsidered and applied to a wider area.

Crime fiction has for a long time been considered as popular literature—an assessment that prevented worldwide a serious critical engagement with it. Only in recent years, critical literary theories have started to be applied to popular literary genres like crime fiction. In the case of the eastern Mediterranean crime fiction—as the article of Tüfekçioğlu in this volume shows exemplary for Turkey—a lot of work is still ahead of us. Not only in the case of Turkey is it necessary to rethink the question of literary criticism. A more systematic discussion of international investigation methods for the literatures presented in this volume would definitely be of great use. An issue that we want to mention in this regard is the question of gender: Is it a coincidence that the great majority of Eastern Mediterranean crime fiction writers are men? Women enter the world of crime fiction mainly not as writers but as fictional characters, and mainly of two kinds: They are either *femme fatale* or victim. Systematic theoretical work on this topic with the help of contemporary gender studies would certainly bring interesting results. Another issue is the question of genre. As the article of Sagaster shows for the case of two hard-boiled novels set in Cyprus, a genre which formally satisfies the same conditions, can carry very different and even contradictory messages.

We hope that in bringing together these articles on crime fiction of different regions and countries of the eastern Mediterranean, we have provided at least a kind of ‘base’ to delve deeper into the topic. The predominant aim of this volume is to inspire further research by addressing literary scholars on the eastern Mediterranean with a passion for crime fiction who would like to combine the pleasant with the useful. It would be fruitful to further study the close connection, already alluded to in several contributions to the present volume, between crime fiction and nation-building, crime fiction and political and social structure (especially gender roles), as well as the attitude of literary criticism towards crime fiction—topics that have already been dealt with in the context of western literatures.

1 Michael Reynolds (ed.), *Black and Blue: An introduction to the Mediterranean Noir*. Europa editions, New York and London, 2006.