



TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

VOLUME 12, NOV 2020



Book Review: *The Parisian* by Isabella Hammad. Kristien Potgieter.

Transnational Literature, vol. 12, November 2020

URL: <https://transnationalliterature.org/>

***The Parisian* by Isabella Hammad (Jonathan Cape, 2019)
Reviewed by Kristien Potgieter**

The Parisian opens on a ship in 1914, midway through nineteen-year-old Midhat Kamal's journey from his home in Nablus, Palestine, still under Ottoman rule at the time, to Montpellier in France. It is a fitting start for a novel filled with journeys across national, cultural and linguistic lines and concerned with the very making and negotiating of borders during the Palestinian struggle for political clarity in the years preceding World War II.

But this sea journey is also a particularly fitting introduction to Midhat, who essentially spends the duration of this intricate, exquisitely written novel adrift between worlds. He never quite belongs no matter where he finds himself, whether that is among his French hosts in Montpellier while he studies medicine, at the Sorbonne in Paris, or back home in Nablus. An early scene on the ship aptly establishes Midhat's loneliness and dissociation from his surroundings and his own self: "The outline of his body weighed on him as a hard, sore shape, and his heart beat very fast" (4). These "shocks of separateness" (87) are a recurring motif throughout the rest of the novel.

While in Montpellier, Midhat lives with Frédéric Molineu, a widowed anthropologist, and his daughter, Jeannette. In these early scenes of Montpellier society, Hammad deftly portrays Midhat's sense of alienation in a foreign culture, compounded by the frustration of having to communicate in a language he is not fluent in, of being "the foreigner unable to control his own meanings, lost in the wild multiple of language" (87). He speaks French "with the accidental definiteness of a person using a second language" (91). Though Midhat is the novel's central figure, the third-person narration is threaded with the backstories of various characters, including Haj Taher, Midhat's father, and Jeannette and Docteur Molineu, creating a vivid and densely woven tapestry of characters set against the backdrop of World War I and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire.

Eventually, romance blooms between the idealistic Midhat and the more reserved Jeannette, who is still reeling from her mother's mysterious mental illness and suicide some years previously. Their relationship is portrayed delicately, almost dreamily, with restrained embraces and secret meetings in dusty corners of the large Molineu house: "it was a love with morning's freshness, and they never saw the shadows of evening seep through those unclean windows" (122).

At the same time, one senses at every turn how easily things might go awry for two young people from such different backgrounds; Midhat's eagerness to get to know Jeannette is simultaneously "attended by strong gusts of anxiety" (71). Indeed, Midhat eventually discovers that he has been the object of Docteur Molineu's scholarly interest, that Molineu wishes to study "the effect of a new language learned by a primitive brain" (128). It is a jarring reminder for Midhat of his fundamental "otherness" in Molineu's eyes; he is "Harrowed by the glimpse of a strange outside view of himself" (158). Though he had hoped for Molineu's blessing to marry Jeannette, he now muses that "One did not study one's sons-in-law" (129).

The resulting confrontation, during which Jeannette defends her father, causes Midhat to leave Montpellier for Paris, where he spends the following several years studying history at the Sorbonne and engaging in lively political conversation with other Arabs living in Paris. But the memory of his idyllic romance with Jeannette, along with its distressing end, casts a shadow over Midhat for the next two decades that he cannot seem to shake, and Hammad is brilliant at evoking the emotional ripples and currents of this formative loss. In Paris, Midhat often imagines the various women he sleeps with to be Jeannette and, "Emerging from the fantasy to find a stranger in his arms, he would hear a high ringing sound and make love half in disgust" (156).

After a few years in Paris, Midhat returns home to Nablus and attempts to build the kind of life his father expects for him, first by entering the family business and later by marrying a local girl, Fatima Hammad. He earns the nickname "al-Barisi," "the Parisian," for the elaborate clothing style he acquired in Paris and for his casual speckling of everyday conversation with French, eccentricities which set him apart from the community in Nablus. A perpetual dreamer, Midhat also drifts apart from his more politically active friends and the revolutionary cousin he was close with as a child, Jamil.

Once Midhat leaves Paris for Nablus, the narrative increasingly focuses on other characters, including Midhat's future wife Fatima and his friend Hani Murad, who becomes an important political advisor to the real-life historical figure of the Emir Faisal, who is later appointed the King of Iraq. Hammad presumably expands the novel's perspective in this way in order to give a wide-ranging view of a turbulent moment in history, as she follows characters whose lives intersect with the political forces at play in varying ways. It also showcases the impressive depth of her historical research.

We are introduced to Père Antoine, for instance, a French Dominican priest who is in Nablus to conduct a study of the region and is eventually asked by the British authorities to spy on the local community. Hammad paints a fascinating figure in the priest, a morally ambiguous outsider who loves Nablus yet rather arrogantly assumes insider access he does not actually possess. His character trajectory reads like a distillation of the colonial conceit shown by the British and French, whose constant interference in the Middle East causes much of the conflict at

the time the novel is set. When he completes his anthropological monograph on Nabulsi society, the onset of war causes Antoine to realise that he has almost entirely misinterpreted the people whom he so carefully observed for years: “it was all completely remarkable, and completely beyond the compass of Antoine’s understanding” (448).

Antoine’s ill-informed research, as well as Frédéric Molineu’s desire to analyse Midhat, an exotic Oriental to his eyes, could be viewed as astute commentary on the West’s tendency to produce knowledge about other cultures based on misguided, often racist assumptions. Molineu and Antoine’s sense of entitlement to the stories of others (Molineu condescendingly insists that he only means to “humanise” (132) Midhat) is also strongly reminiscent of present-day conversations around cultural appropriation in literature, such as the debate surrounding white American author Jeanine Cummins’s novel *American Dirt*, which in early 2020 was widely criticised by Mexican writers for its harmful and stereotypical portrayal of Mexican people and culture.

Timely resonances such as these are what keep *The Parisian* from feeling like stuffy historical fiction and make it a consistently fresh and absorbing read. Hammad does not resort to types, but presents a large cast of well-drawn characters who feel like individuals, such as Eli, a Samaritan tailor who becomes Midhat’s business partner, and Sahar Murad, Hani Murad’s feminist wife. Similarly, Hammad’s unapologetic and liberal use of untranslated French and Arabic in the text makes the novel feel authentically grounded in its setting; she is not pandering to a monolingual anglophone readership.

As mentioned, the novel leaves Midhat’s point of view for extended periods to follow various side characters like Fatima, Hani, Père Antoine and others, sometimes going back in time to fill in details from their pasts and then often accelerating forward again, skipping over significant events in Midhat’s life which are then referred to only in hindsight. It is in some of these lengthy chapters that I most felt the strain of the novel’s sprawling and ambitious scope. I often longed to return to Midhat’s point of view, which, despite its sense of aloofness, ironically acts as the novel’s anchoring perspective. The last third of the novel in particular felt somewhat lacking in focus, especially due to an unfortunate plot decision that almost completely sidelines Midhat and essentially immobilises his character until the very end. And yet, perhaps this is an entirely appropriate choice for a novel with such a detached hero. One gets the sense that Midhat himself, much like the novel, slips haphazardly in and out of his own life. He is a consistently compelling if enigmatic figure through which to view these monumental historical events, the after-effects of which we are still seeing in present-day Palestine and Israel.

But that seems to be precisely the point. Hammad does not give us a history inhabited by clear-cut heroes and villains. Instead, she paints a rich, thought-provoking picture of a complex, tangled historical period without artificially contriving to untangle it. It is a remarkably confident and accomplished debut novel.

Kristien Potgieter

Kristien Potgieter is currently a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University, focusing on writing for young people. She also has an MA in Creative Writing from the University

of East Anglia, where she was the 2015-2016 Booker Prize Scholar. She was born and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa, and her short fiction has appeared online and in print.