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Khoury, Elias

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The author of eleven novels, four books of criticism, and a collection of short stories, Elias Khoury was born in 1948 and grew up in Ashrafiyyeh, a predominantly Christian Orthodox neighborhood in East Beirut. A notable member of the city's cultural and intellectual scene since the 1970s, he joined the journal *Mawaqif's* editorial board in 1972, which met every Sunday in the poet Adonis's house. The group was, according to **Edward Said (1989)**, responsible for "some of the most searching investigations of modernity and modernism as applied to Arab culture." His first book was a work of literary criticism, *Searching for a Horizon: The Arabic Novel after the Defeat of 1967*, published in 1974, followed by the novel, *On the Relations of the Circle* in 1975. It was with the publication of the well-received *Little Mountain* in 1977 that he established himself as a leading figure in the creation of a new style of Arabic fiction. The novel was written during Khoury's participation in the Lebanese civil war and tells the story of an activist who joins the ranks of Palestinian freedom fighters despite their opposition to the Christian militias associated with his community. Like the narrator, Khoury has situated himself beyond sectarian lines, consistently espousing the Palestinian cause as an activist, journalist, cultural critic, public intellectual, or novelist, often at substantial personal risk. *Little Mountain* is a text deeply concerned with the question of how to depict the immediate present of the war. Both its content and form touch on Khoury's definition of the Lebanese novel, which he believes to have been born during the war of 1975–90, when for the first time the writings of Lebanese novelists began to exhibit unifying features.

Khoury (2006) defines the modern Lebanese novel by five central characteristics: (1) the freedom from concern for standard conventions of form; (2) a freedom in thematic approach; (3) a focus on subjectivity through its narrative voice and historical vision; (4) an innovative use of language; and (5) characters who appear realistic to the contemporary collective social imagination. His fiction depicts a geography intimately familiar to the reader and starkly portrays the communitarian sects that comprise the modern Lebanese state. Often charting the quotidian reality of war, Khoury has developed a highly distinctive narrative style. Digressive with overlapping temporal frames, his prose is ordered by a repetition that lends it a sense of orality. Several themes frequently recur and overlap: narration as trope, memory and the civil war, the representation of marginalization, and the Palestinian experience.

His views on writing are crucial to his fiction; writing is a process through which multiple versions of the truth can be accessed and a means of disrupting dominant narratives. The act of narration is often conspicuously featured through the metafictional device of a narrator involved in the writing or oral recitation of the story (*The Journey of Little Gandhi*, *The Kingdom of Strangers*, *Gate of the Sun*, *Yalo*). Through a process of constant revision, the narrator/storyteller/writer actively participates in the text's construction, adding to its fragmentation and effectively destabilizing the authority of the narrative voice.

A concern for collective memory is reflected in the title of his collection of essays, *Lost Memory* (1982). As a researcher, he had difficulty finding adequate documentation of earlier conflicts in Lebanon, particularly the civil war of 1960. Recognizing that the historical past was in danger of effacement, he was moved to record the war that he was living. Literature and history, however, are not synonymous; the role of literature is to question how things are seen, not to reconstruct the past.

In some respects, his work serves to provide the marginalized with a voice, evident in his choice of protagonists and use of language. His novels are populated with anti-heroes: the prostitute, the shoe-shiner (*The Journey of Little Gandhi*); the refugee, the wife of the absent resistance fighter patiently waiting on occupied land (*Gate of the Sun*); the former militiaman and criminal, simultaneously torturer and victim (*Yalo*). His fiction has effectively opened up the classical language to the vernacular of real lived experience. Though he writes in Modern Standard Arabic, Khoury has successfully integrated the diversity of spoken Arabic into his texts, breaking down the separation of written and spoken registers.

The subject of Palestine dominates several of his novels (*The Kingdom of Strangers, As Though She Were Sleeping*), but it was with the publication of *Gate of the Sun* in 1998 that he achieved worldwide fame. While affiliated with the Palestine Research Center in Beirut in the 1970s, he recorded the personal histories of scores of refugees expelled from Palestine in 1948, later included in the novel. Commonly hailed as the first Palestinian epic, it is the most thorough literary depiction of the Palestinian exodus of 1948 to date. The text is notable for its sensitive treatment and recovery of Palestinian history and its rejection of dominant nationalist ideologies and demythologization of regularly accepted notions of heroism.

Khoury has held a number of editorial positions. From 1975 to 1979 he was the editor of *Shu'un Filastiniyyah (Palestinian Affairs)* in collaboration with Mahmoud Darwish. He has been the editorial director of *al-Karmel* and *al-Safir* and was the longstanding editor of *al-Nahar's* weekly cultural supplement, *al-Mulhaq*. He is currently Global Distinguished Professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at New York University. Nine of his novels have been translated into English.

SEE ALSO: [Arabic Literature](#); [Darwish, Mahmoud](#)

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