The Palimpsest City: Memory, Errancy, and Urban Subjectivity in Contemporary Arabic and Japanese Literature

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Abstract: This article proposes an in-depth comparative study of representations of the city in two contemporary literary corpora, Arabic literature and Japanese literature, through a deliberately decentered problem: the city is considered not as a mere setting or narrative backdrop but as a text to be read, deciphered, and rewritten, a symbolic space charged with cultural, memorial, and identitarian meanings that literature contributes as much to constructing as to representing. By comparing the urban poetics of Naguib Mahfouz, Elias Khoury, and Ibrahim al-Koni, on the one hand, and those of Haruki Murakami, Banana Yoshimoto, and Kōbō Abe, on the other, the article argues that the contemporary city constitutes in both literary traditions a paradoxical space: at once a site of dissolution of traditional identities and a space for the emergence of new forms of subjectivity and belonging. The comparison reveals that the two traditions develop convergent narrative strategies to account for the urban experience of modernity, particularly errancy, disorientation, solitude, and the archaeological reading of ruins as modes of inhabiting the city, while maintaining profound differences rooted in the specific cultural, historical, and political inheritance of each society. Finally, the article proposes the notion of the palimpsest city as a central comparatist concept, enabling an understanding of the dynamics of memory, forgetting, and reinvention that traverse both traditions.
Keywords: urban poetics, Arabic literature, Japanese literature, modernity, identity, errancy, comparatism, space, subjectivity, palimpsest, memory, solitude

INTRODUCTION: THE CITY AS TEXTS, THE TEXT AS CITY

The city has been among the great themes of world literature since at least the nineteenth century, and its presence in literary works almost always indicates something essential about the society that produces it, as well as about the manner in which it is represented and perceives itself in the mirror of the city it is constructed. However, the city in the literature is not merely a theme or a setting like any other. It constitutes a symbolic space heavily charged with cultural, historical, and political meanings that differ considerably from one culture, period, and country to another. To compare the urban poetics of various literary traditions is therefore to equip oneself with the means of comparing ways of living and thinking about modernity, relationships to tradition and change, conceptions of the individual and the collective, and modes of negotiation between remembrance and forgetting. In this sense, the city is never merely a given space that literature would represent: it is also, and at the same time, a space that literature helps to construct and to imbue with meaning. The great literary cities, the Paris of Balzac and Baudelaire, the Dublin of Joyce, the St Petersburg of Dostoevsky, the Cairo of Mahfouz, and the Tokyo of Murakami, exist in the collective imagination as much through the texts that give an account of them as through their own geographical and architectural reality. Urban literature does not merely reflect the city: it participates in its symbolic elaboration and influences how its inhabitants dwell in it, experience it, represent it to themselves, and confer meaning upon it.[1]

[1] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 139–191.

It is precisely from such a perspective that it proves illuminating to compare Arabic literature and Japanese literature. These two literary traditions possess no direct historical relations that would bind them (they would not have reciprocally influenced their development; would not have drawn upon common references; and are generally not read by the same audience, within the same educational network, etc.), and it is therefore this very distance that renders the comparison revealing. If perceptible convergence emerges between the two corpora in the manner of representing and symbolically inhabiting the city, such convergence cannot then be explained by influence. These texts inevitably refer to deeper problems, illustrating a similar response to the challenges posed by urban modernisation across diverse cultures. The latter confronts questions that transcend national and cultural boundaries.[2]

The principal question guiding this article is as follows: How do contemporary Arabic and Japanese literatures represent the city as a symbol of modernity? What narrative and stylistic strategies do they deploy to account for the urban experience, at once alienating and emancipatory, destructive and creative, forgetful and memorable? Furthermore, what insights does the comparison between these two traditions offer into how different cultures navigate their relationship with urban modernity and the symbolic resources they employ for this purpose? To answer these questions, our reflection will be organised into five stages: the first will consist of a theoretical reflection focused on the relationship between city and literature and on the analysis of the particularities specific to each tradition in its representations of the city, followed by a comparative examination of errancy and solitude as modes of inhabiting urban modernity, then a consideration of the destroyed and reconstructed city as a space of memory and, finally, a theoretical proposal concerning the palimpsest city as a central concept for comparatists.

I. City and Literature: Theoretical Frameworks for Comparison

1.1 The City as Text: From Urban Semiotics to the Poetics of Space

The metaphor of the city as text has a long history in urban and literary studies. Roland Barthes was thus able to analyse the city as a semiological system, that is, a collection of signs that are read and respond to one another according to given cultural rules. [3] By envisioning the city as a text bearing a culture, a history, and a social organisation, the literary text that represents it resembles a reading of this urban text, an interpretative reading of what the city says but also of what it leaves unsaid. It is within the same perspective that Michel de Certeau proposed an essential distinction, contrasting the elevated gaze of the urban planner who sees from above, a plan, a structure, a system, the city, with the gaze of the walker who sees from within, in movement, in chance, in everyday practice.[4]

This distinction is of great interest for the analysis of literary urban poetics, in which characters are almost always walkers, practitioners of urban space whose gaze is that of the interior, of lived experience, of the body in motion within the city. For Gaston Bachelard, spaces of intimacy, the house, the corner, and the nest may be conceived as topographies of the interior, symbolic structures through which the human being defines and structures himself in the world.[5] This notion of topophilia of affective and symbolic attachment to spaces makes it possible to consider the manner in which characters in literary works relate to their cities—the city inhabited or traversed, loved or lost—all of these affective relations that are equally modes of the construction of identity.

1.2 Urban Modernisation as a Common Challenge

[2] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 20–65.
[3] Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), 40–70.
[4] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 170–191.
[5] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957), 24–52.

Whatever the specificities of different types of societies, in the twentieth century, urban modernisation constituted a common challenge: how is one to inhabit these new spaces whose transformation deserves to be discussed on the scale of historical duration? How is one to preserve, within spaces in perpetual becoming, the continuity of meaning and the sense of an inhabited identity? How is one to establish identities as points of reference within spaces where anonymous mobility replaces the stability of a territorial anchoring of being-in-the-world?

This line of questioning is not confined to a single culture; it arises, with variations that are certainly notable according to context, in all societies that have experienced modern urbanisation. It is precisely this common ground that renders possible the comparison between two literary traditions as distant as Arabic and Japanese: both are societies situated in different historical contexts and rhythms but structurally beset by identical challenges linked to the abrupt, accelerated modernisation of their urban spaces.

1.3 The Palimpsest-City: A Comparatist Concept

To analyse urban poetics in the two corpora, we propose mobilising the notion of the palimpsest city, which we consider particularly illuminating as a comparatist concept. A palimpsest is a parchment whose original writing has been erased to write a new text.[6] while the original script is left legible beneath the new one. This image perfectly represents the city in both corpora: a city whose layers of the past never entirely disappear but remain present beneath contemporary constructions, read only by those who know how to read them. Cities may be conceived as palimpsests because they constitute an accumulation, within a single space, of histories that are added together and coexist. However, it is also an image of collective memory, for, like societies, they bear within themselves a memory that time never entirely effaces but that may sometimes be forgotten or concealed. Writing the city is the art of reading these palimpsests, of bringing to light the inscriptions buried beneath contemporary constructions.

2. The City in Two Literary Traditions: Specificities and Legacies

2.1 Between Historical Depth and Colonial Rupture: the Arab City

In contemporary Arabic literature, the representation of the city is indeed marked by this dual temporality: on the one hand, an awareness of an ancient urban heritage, Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus, or Beirut, are among the oldest cities in the world, possessing a millennial history during which they have accumulated urban legacies of remarkable density; on the other hand, the brutality of the transformations effected by colonial modernity, and subsequently by postcolonial modernity, which have profoundly reconfigured these accumulated spaces suddenly and forcefully.

The writer Naguib Mahfouz thus constructed an entire body of work around Cairo, particularly the Cairo of the alleyways, bazaars, and cafés of the old city, which presents itself both as a real geographical territory and as a symbolic figure of a form of collective life on the verge of disappearance.[7] The Cairo Trilogy, comprising *Bayn al-Qasrayn*, *Qasr al-Shawq*, and *Al-Sukkariyya*, indeed makes the city a character in its own right, the mutations of the city over the course of the twentieth century serving as the motif for a meditation on the frictions between tradition and modernity, between collective belonging and increasing individualisation. The problematic of Mahfouz's Cairo is not merely the backdrop of the characters al-Sayyid Ahmad and his family: it is the space in which the very destiny of a culture and, by extension, of a civilisation is at stake in the face of the challenge of modernity. What characterises Mahfouz's urban poetics is his capacity to render present the historical and symbolic density of the city without lapsing into nostalgia: his characters

[6] "Palimpsest," *Le Robert Dico en ligne*.

[7] Naguib Mahfouz, *The Cairo Trilogy* (Paris: Seuil, 1985–1987).

inhabit a stratified Cairo, where the traces of the past medieval, Ottoman, and colonial permeate spaces, practices, and bodies, without thereby immobilising the forces of change. This tension between historical depth and the movement of change constitutes Mahfouz's urban poetics.

Elias Khoury, for his part, offers a more traumatic and radically different urban experience, that of Beirut destroyed and emptied by the Lebanese Civil War.[8] In *The Gate of the Sun* and in other texts in his oeuvre, the city is no longer the setting of the story but its principal victim, a devastated space in which, through its ruins, its unfinished reconstructions, and its architectural wounds, the unresolved wound of Palestinian and Lebanese collective memory is embodied. Khoury's Beirut remains a palimpsest in the most literal sense: a city in which the strata of successive ruins and reconstructions are legible, according to a subjective logic that resists the amnesia imposed by all reconstruction. Ibrahim al-Koni, a Libyan writer whose works are set primarily in the Saharan desert, represents another dimension of Arabic urban poetics, that of absence or denial.[9]

In this literary work, the desert appears as the anticity, as the space conducive to the survival or preservation of forms of collective memory invested in the relationship to nature or in modes of communal belonging that are destroyed in the modern city. The dialectical tension between desert and city, nomadic tradition on the one hand and urban sedentariness on the other, emerges by contrast as a revelation of the major stakes that the city poses for contemporary Arab societies, for the city is not merely a geographical "space," but a way of life, a way of organising and understanding relations among human beings and between them and their environment.

2.2 The Japanese City as a Tension between Hypermodernity and the Persistence of Tradition

The representation of the city in contemporary Japanese literature is likewise marked by an equally strong tension between tradition and modernity. From the Meiji Restoration of 1868 to postwar reconstruction, Japan underwent a modernisation of spectacular rapidity and intensity, transforming a largely rural and feudal society into one of the most urbanised and technologically advanced in the world. This metamorphosis thus produced cities and Tokyo in particular of astonishing heterogeneity and complexity, spaces in which old, densely woven districts stand alongside towers of glass and steel, Shinto temples alongside shopping centres, and millennial ritual practices alongside the most advanced forms of digital technology. In his essay on Tokyo, Roland Barthes noted a characteristic of the Japanese city: an empty center, the forbidden and inaccessible imperial space around which everything is ordered to create the city, whose spatial foundation rests upon an architecture radically different from that of the European and, of course, an Arab conception of the city centered upon a monument or a public square.[10]

Far from being anecdotal, this semiological observation by Barthes reveals something essential about the Japanese city itself, subjected to the ordering of a void, of absence, of a lacuna, where the European and Arab city are organised around a visible and monumental centre. In the novelistic work of Haruki Murakami, a Tokyo takes shape that is faithful in its minutest everyday details, street names, public transport lines, and the names of restaurants and bars and yet profoundly strange in the logic that organises it. [11] His characters inhabit a city mapped in its smallest details, yet whose deeper logic they are unable to grasp. The strangeness it contains is not the strangeness of the fantastic in the conventional sense. This supernatural element would fracture an ordinary reality but rather

[8] Elias Khoury, *Gate of the Sun* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2002), 45–100.
[9] Ibrahim al-Koni, *The Hidden Oasis* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2003).
[10] Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), 40–70.
[11] Haruki Murakami, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

the very strangeness of modernity, which produces an experience of disconnection: individuals evolve within a framework they believe they know but whose impersonal functioning keeps them at a distance from themselves.

In a different yet convergent register, the characters of Banana Yoshimoto are not lost in an unknown city: they are lost in a city they know too well. In this familiarity, itself has become alienating. In *Kitchen*[12], moreover, in other texts, the city is perceived not through journeys or wanderings but rather through intimate spaces, the kitchen, the flat, and the small neighbourhood shops that serve as refuges within the anonymous metropolis. This urban microgeography of intimacy constitutes a response to the anonymity and atomisation of the large city, creating spaces of warmth and connection that, in so many ways, hold urban dehumanisation at bay.

Finally, Kōbō Abe represents the most radical and darkest dimension of Japanese urban poetics.[13] In *The Woman in the Dunes* and other texts, the city is presented as a labyrinthine space in which inhabitants find themselves, literally or symbolically, trapped in situations from which they cannot escape. This Kafkaesque dimension of Abe's urban poetics offers a particularly lucid and anguished analysis of the mechanisms of alienation produced by urban modernity.

III. Errancy and Solitude as Modes of Inhabiting the Contemporary City

3.1 The Reinvented Flâneur: From Baudelaire to Non-Western Modernity

Drawing upon Baudelaire's poetry and his reflections on the Paris arcades, Walter Benjamin theorised the figure of the flâneur: the individual who strolls aimlessly through the city and allows himself to be carried along by the free associations it provokes, reading in its streets and shop windows the signs of an era.[14] However, this figure is fundamentally linked to the industrial city of nineteenth-century capitalist Europe. One may ask whether it remains operative and whether it must be adapted or deconstructed to analyse urban experiences produced in entirely different contexts.

In contemporary Japanese literature, although the motif of the flâneur is particularly developed in Murakami and Yoshimoto, it assumes forms that differ profoundly from those it takes in Baudelaire. In his work, the flâneur is an observer who distinguishes himself even as he mingles with the crowd. This ironic and contemplative figure regards the spectacles of modernity with detachment. In contrast, Murakami's characters are beings in search of something or someone whose name they sometimes can scarcely articulate and who, in their wandering through the city, attempt to reconstruct an identity or a lost meaning even as modernity has dissolved the traditional reference points that once structured existence. The relation of these characters to the urban spaces they traverse is emblematic: they define themselves more through their practices of cultural consumption, cafés, records, books, and bars than through familial or professional affiliations. Such a construction of identity through cultural uses within urban space constitutes a means of responding to the dissolution, brought about by Japanese modernisation, of traditional identities: the village community, the extended family, and the guild. The city thus becomes the place where new forms of belonging are recomposed through everyday practices and rituals that establish continuities, repetitions, and habits within an otherwise highly unstable world.

Within Arabic literary production, urban displacement often assumes a more political and tragic dimension in contexts marked by war, exile, and destruction that characterise the contemporary history of Arab cities.[15] In Khoury's work, characters wander through

[12] Banana Yoshimoto, *Kitchen* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).
[13] Kōbō Abe, *The Woman in the Dunes* (Paris: Stock, 1964).
[14] Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century* (Paris: Cerf, 1989), 432–482.
[15] Elias Khoury, *Gate of the Sun* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2002).

destroyed or threatening cities in search of points of reference within spaces already dispossessed of their habitual coordinates, pulverised by war. Such constrained perambulation cannot be confused with either the free flânerie of the Baudelairean flâneur or the melancholic wandering of Murakami's protagonists: it is a forced errancy of survival, an attempt, in sum, to continue inhabiting a space whose symbolic and physical dimensions have collapsed.

3.2 Urban Solitude: Between Social Pathology and the Creative Condition

Solitude within the city is among the most powerful and recurrent leitmotifs in both corpora; however, its representation varies considerably according to traditions and texts. Numerous works in contemporary Japanese literature depict urban solitude as an ambivalent condition, painful in the isolation it imposes yet potentially liberating insofar as it opens a space of autonomy, self-exploration, and creativity that no more structured and controlling society affords to the same extent as it does to these isolated subjects of the megacities. In the works of Yoshimoto, for example, the solitude of characters in the great city is closely linked to the experience of mourning.[16] Her protagonists, often very young people confronted with loss, undergo an isolation that paradoxically becomes a space for the recomposition of meaning. Within the disorder left by vanished relationships, solitude is transformed into a site of inner elaboration, even into a singular modality of belonging to the world.

In Arabic literature, solitude expresses less of a quest for the self than the painful symptom of a severance from communal solidarities, the experience of a rupture of the ties that bind the individual to his own. These are figures of estrangement, of suffering engendered by submission to the city, by departure from the familiar world, by rupture of relational circles and networks that structure social space, and by loss of the everyday rituals that enable the human being to anchor himself within his horizon of existence. Torn from these bonds, the subject finds himself cast adrift within a space of modernity, often misaligned, where numerous ties are lost.

Disparities in the histories of modernity and in conceptions of respect owing to the Other, notably in relation to the body, lead one to question the ways of relating to alterity in Arab and Japanese cultures. However, any comparison risks inducing fallacious power relations. It would be overly simplistic to oppose, in a reductive manner, a Japanese tradition that makes solitude a value and an Arab tradition that associates it solely with the denunciation of despair. Both terms of such an opposition would verge upon cultural stereotypes rather than proceed from an analysis grounded in faithful rereadings of the texts. In the case of Abe, however, the solitary condition does not refer to a spiritual or existential value; it is indeed of the order of urban isolation, experienced as a bubble from which the protagonist attempts to escape an experience of radical alienation, offering no promise of emancipation. [17] Conversely, in certain contemporary Arab writers, withdrawal into themselves may be conceived as a condition for affirming individual exigency, even in social situations where the pressure of the collective tends to impede individual autonomy.

3.3 Urban Anonymity: Threat and Resources

Anonymity is among the defining characteristics of the modern metropolis, and its representation in the two corpora reveals varied and contrasting attitudes. Indeed, anonymity may be experienced as a threat to the dilution of individual identity within the masses, the absence of social reference points that justify existence or as a resource, the freedom to define oneself without the constraints of one’s community of origin, and the possibility of living multiple identities and undergoing multiple experiences made possible by the nonfixity of identity.

[16] Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century* (Paris: Cerf, 1989), 432–482.
[17] Ángel Rama, *The Lettered City* (Hanover: Ediciones del Norte, 1984), 1–30.

In Murakami's Tokyo, self-efficacy is approached with a characteristic ambiguity.[18] On the one hand, it is a condition of certain freedom in that characters may live as they please without being subjected to the gaze and judgement of the community. On the other hand, it engenders solitude and discouragement, which are equally forms of suffering and of quest. This ambivalence sustains the sense of a society that has very rapidly departed from established communal structures to embrace an individualised urbanism, without yet having found the norms of belonging capable of replacing those of a bygone world.
In the Arabic literature, the relationship with urban invisibility is often more conflictual, as it is negotiated within societies where communal structures, such as extended family, neighbourhoods, and mosques, are particularly powerful and where social pressure is strong. The individual who seeks refuge in urban anonymity is often in search of an escape, a sentiment not always present to the same degree in Japanese literature; however, this flight is nonetheless accompanied by a feeling of guilt absent from, or at least less marked in, Japanese writing.

IV. Devastated and Rebuilt Cities: Memory, Ruin, Temporality

4.1 Ruined Cities as Sites of Memory and Resistance

Destroyed cities occupy a singular and significant place in both corpora, and their treatment in the two traditions reveals divergent relationships to collective memory and historical responsibility. In the Arabic literature, the destruction of the city through civil wars in Beirut, invasions in Baghdad, and protracted occupations in Palestinian cities is a recent historical experience, often still ongoing, from which a tense, sometimes despairing reflection on the relationship to urban space, collective memory, and political identity emerges.
Beirut in Khoury's work constitutes the most accomplished case of this poetics of the devastated city in Arabic literature.[7] In the city, there unfolds not only a destruction of bodies but also of the discourses and representations that once gave meaning to places. War has not merely physically damaged buildings; it has destroyed the narratives that inhabitants had constructed around their spaces and the common life that united them. Postwar architectural reconstruction embodied in the Solidere project to rehabilitate Beirut's city center represents for Khoury an amnesiac and uprooted modernity, a reconstruction stifled by the inability to confront not only the wounds inflicted upon the city but also the memory of what caused them.
In the literary tradition of the *hibakusha* (the survivors of the atomic bomb), whose development in Japanese literature is inseparable from the bombings of the Second World War, particularly those of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the question of annihilation and memory assumes a singular form, scarcely comparable to that found in other literary traditions. In his novels, Kōbō Abe stages a postwar Tokyo in which ruin and reconstructed ruins give rise to labyrinthine spaces that function as metaphors for the identity disorientation of a society compelled to reinvent all its reference points and values after the annihilation it has just endured.[19]

4.2 Reconstruction and the Risk of Amnesia

The question of reconstruction after the destruction of cities arises in both traditions in similar terms: Is it possible to rebuild a city without also reconstructing its memory? If rebuilding effaces the traces of destruction, ruins, scars, and empty spaces, what then becomes of the collective memory woven in and through those spaces? In most works of contemporary Arabic literature, rebuilding is often staged as an institutionalised amnesia, a means for political and economic powers to turn the page and move on after having

[18] Haruki Murakami, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).
[19] Kōbō Abe, *The Woman in the Dunes* (Paris: Stock, 1964).

drained painful episodes of violence and collective responsibility of their force by removing the physical traces that would allow the memory of those episodes to remain alive. The Beirut reconstructed by Solidere in the 1990s has become, in Lebanese literature, an emblem of this amnesia, a city that effaces its scars to present to the world a new image of prosperity that erases the traces of the civil war.

Reconstruction in Japanese literature, by contrast, is ambivalent. After its defeat, the country witnessed, within a few decades, the emergence of a modern urban network that arose from the ruins of catastrophe. This restoration initially constitutes a historical tour de force before becoming the object of critical interrogation: what does it mean to rebuild? Is it a matter of reconstructing what once was or of producing something else under the very name of "reconstruction"? Through numerous texts devoted to this question, the Japanese literature explores precisely what reconstruction reconstructs and what it effaces. To repair is also to make disappear: with the ruins, the forms of solidarity and community forged in the very ordeal of destruction sometimes vanish. In restoring material order, urban modernisation may thus dissolve the relational intensity created by a disaster. What is reconstructed, then, is not merely a space but another mode of inhabiting the city, at the risk of erasing the singular quality of the bonds woven at the heart of tragedy.

4.3 The City as Involuntary Archive

If the two traditions meet and converge without difficulty anywhere, is it not in the representation of the city as an involuntary archive? In this city, where the past still resonates despite officially prescribed forgetting, the traces of history resist and persist, which, in their discreet endurance, become sites of knowledge for those who know how to decipher the signs. It is precisely this palimpsestic representation of the city that we propose calling the palimpsest city. Whether one speaks of Mahfouz or of Murakami, the principal protagonists of their works are characters who read in the city the traces of a past that modernity's transformations have covered over without entirely erasing.[20] They inhabit spaces that bear within their architecture, their smells, their sounds, the memory of what took place before, and what existed prior to rebuilding and modernisation. This archaeological search of the city is at once a resistance to the amnesia engendered by modernisation and a means of keeping alive the links to modes of existence and experiences that no longer correspond to present realities but continue to ground collective imaginaries and to nourish individual identities.

5. The Palimpsest-City as a Comparatist Concept

5.1 Definition and scope of the concept

The notion of the palimpsest-city introduced above now merits development as a comparatist concept in its own right. Let us recall that a palimpsest is a manuscript whose erased writing remains partially legible beneath the new text. Applied to the city, this notion designates the urban space in which successive historical layers, archaeological, architectural, human, and memorial, coexist, layers that the literature represents in all the complexity of their stratification. The concept of the palimpsest-city proves particularly effective within our comparative framework because it makes it possible to apprehend, on the one hand, what unites the two traditions the representation of the city as a stratified space in which older traces persist beneath contemporary constructions and, on the other hand, what distinguishes them precisely in their handling of this stratification, in what they choose to do with these older layers. One might say, for example, that in the Arab-Islamic register, the palimpsest city is often experienced as a wound whose burial must nevertheless remain legible, for the forgetting imposed by the present constitutes an additional stone added to the violence inflicted upon the victims of history. In Japanese culture, the notion

[20] Naguib Mahfouz, *The Cairo Trilogy* (Paris: Seuil, 1985–1987).

of the palimpsest city is often perceived through the prism of ambivalence and strangeness. The vestiges of the past subsist in places completely metamorphosed, creating temporal dissonances that both unsettle and enrich.

5.2 The Palimpsest City and the Question of Identity

Insofar as the palimpsest city participates in a reflection on identity, both collectively and individually, to conceive of the city as a palimpsest leads one to think in terms of palimpsestic identities, which, by this very means, escape any fixed definition and are instead constituted by strata in which echoes of the past and reactivations necessarily share the stage. This palimpsestic paradigm of identity provides literature with a lever in all the struggles it undertakes against every version of identitarian essentialism (nationalism, communitarianism, or cultural essentialism, which tend to reduce a culture or even a city to a fixed and alienating essence). After all, at the heart of both traditions, urban literature takes center stage in elaborating a vision of identity as process rather than essence.[21]

Patrick Modiano illustrates this conception in the very movement of his narrative, in which the narrator wanders through contemporary Paris in search of the traces of a Jewish adolescent who disappeared in 1942. In this reading of the city layer by layer, his identity is constructed through the surfacing of a past in relation to which he can define himself only by traversing the strata of a Paris that has covered over but not erased the imprint of the Occupation. His identity is a palimpsest, never fixed in the present or in the past, but continually rewritten through contact with (urban) traces. The palimpsest-city is far more than merely a descriptive concept; it is a critical tool that destabilises any amnesiac or homogeneous approach to urban identity, contesting both amnesiac reconstructions and the exclusions inherent in nationalisms.

CONCLUSION: THE CITY AS A LABORATORY OF COMPARATIVE MODERNITY

An in-depth comparison of the urban poetics practiced in contemporary Arabic and Japanese literature demonstrates that the two traditions, situated within divergent historical, cultural, and political contexts, constitute remarkably similar responses to analogous problems posed by urban modernisation. These resemblances, which are not the product of reciprocal influence or cultural transfer, make manifest the transversal character of the question of the modern experience of the city, a set of problems that each literature addresses in its own manner, with formal and thematic resources often comparable.

Both delineate the modern city as a paradoxical space that nullifies traditional identities while at the same time rendering possible, sometimes in pain and contradiction, new forms of subjectivity and belonging. The urban dweller who emerges from these two studies is a fundamentally modern subject. However, one caught in an ambivalent relation to modernity: formed by it, he is also at times fractured by it. Errancy and solitude are no only romantic motifs but also modes of inhabiting a city that exceed the meaning the individual can ascribe to it. The flâneur of the Arab city and his Japanese counterpart, at once fascinated and disarmed witnesses, advance within a space that takes shape beneath their steps. The two literary traditions upon which we have drawn also elaborate a poetics of the ruined and rebuilt city that profoundly interrogates the relationships among memory, forgetting, and collective identity. In the debris of Beirut, as in the nonapparent yet nonetheless existent scars of Tokyo, the city is not a blank page: it is a palimpsest, a space in which layers of the past coexist beneath the constructions of the present, a space where ghosts persist, refusing to be erased. This palimpsestic dimension, constructed from very

[21] Patrick Modiano, *Dora Bruder* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

different cultural, linguistic, and historical materials, constitutes one of the most striking points of contact between these two literary traditions.

If the resemblances are significant, they do not, however, reflect a shared spatiotemporal identity. The divergences are no less instructive than the similarities: the modes of inscription of the body within urban space, the relations to language and orality, the religious and philosophical legacies that shape perceptions of time and ruin, and the manner in which gender or social class redraw the lived geography of the city, all constitute determinants of difference that resist any hasty synthesis and reaffirm both the creativity of history and the irreducible singularity of each tradition.

It is nevertheless precisely within this space where divergence meets convergence, where divergence and convergence are articulated, that comparative literature draws its full potential because it rejects both naïve universalism and narrow relativism to discern what is common in human experience without effacing what remains irreducibly particular. The city, with its contradictions and interwoven memories, its solitudes and its effervescences, is precisely an ideal laboratory for thinking about the human condition of our contemporaries, and literature, in its capacity to render a sensitive echo of it, undoubtedly remains the most adequate instrument for offering its most faithful representation.

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