

Upon the publication of *Women Writers of the Two Sudans*, the poet Giulio-Enrico Pisani interviewed Laurent Mignon for the Luxembourgish daily *Zeitung vum Lëtzebuenger Vollék*. The original interview in French was published on 21 February 2019 and can be read here: <https://www.zlv.lu/db/1/1404152084175>

Here is a translation into English:

Sudan: Women Writers of Today, or Refusal of Afro-Pessimism

Giulio-Enrico Pisani: Dear Laurent, you are far from being unknown to the readers of the *Zeitung vum Lëtzebuenger Vollék* who will be pleased to reconnect with you. You have just co-edited a new book with Ahmed Al-Shahi entitled "Women Writers of the Two Sudans". Could you tell us a bit about the genesis of this book?

Laurent Mignon: The book is largely based on papers given by women writers from the Sudan, South Sudan and the diaspora at a conference on women's literature of the two Sudans that was organised by Professor Al-Shahi at St Antony's College, University of Oxford in June 2017. The writers in the volume are Najat Idris Ismail, Amal Osman, Sara Hamza Aljack, Stella Gaitano, Marcelina Morgan and Rawda al-Hajj. The texts that were reproduced are very different in nature. Some of the texts evoke the history of women's literature, others are real manifestos for Sudanese literature. The book is bilingual in English and Arabic and also includes, in the Arabic part, poems and short stories by some of the Arabic-speaking contributors.

Giulio-Enrico Pisani: Sudan is a country we know very little about, and usually only through the conflicts and wars that occasionally make the headlines in our media. Why is it important to talk about literature in such a context?

Laurent Mignon: Indeed, the two Sudans do have many problems. Talking about the literature, arts and culture of these lands is an expression of a refusal of fatality; it is a rejection of what some have called "Afro-pessimism". One of the writers, Amal Osman, expresses her exasperation at the fact that in the media Sudan is only synonymous with tragedy. When you reduce a country to the sum of its problems, you end up dehumanising its people. You end up tolerating the intolerable. The texts in this book show us that there are many voices that say no to the intolerable. By highlighting women's literature, the book also allows us to discover voices that have to wage a relentless struggle against the patriarchal structure of their societies. That said, even with the limited sample we present, the diversity in the Sudanese literary field and among the women authors is striking. Can popular literature, including storytelling and poetry, promote reconciliation among the peoples of the region or, on the contrary, does it exacerbate conflict through the values it perpetuates? Should literature break taboos or is this a counterproductive approach in the context of a conservative society? These are some of the questions that are addressed and answered in the volume.

Giulio-Enrico Pisani: Beside its political dimension, what can this book teach someone interested in literary theory?

Laurent Mignon: One of the main lessons of this book is that one cannot theorise literature in the 21st century without also considering Sudanese literature. In this context, the contribution of Stella Gaitano is of great importance. Gaitano, who is originally from South Sudan and learned Arabic in the schools of the north, where her family had fled, argues, not unlike Chinua Achebe about the English language, that the Arabic language can narrate the African experience. She explains that she was won over by the beauty of the language, that she appropriated it and made it African. This is a delicate subject. For some, like the Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o, every language carries its culture of origin and an African who expresses him- or herself in French, English or even Arabic, submits to the cultural codes of the coloniser. Gaitano's reflections are therefore at the centre of the debates on postcolonial literature. Moreover, her appropriation of the Arabic language - the same is true for other authors from the South who have chosen to express themselves in Arabic - indicates that a new "minor literature" is being born, in the sense that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have given to this term.

Giulio-Enrico Pisani: One last question, which is a bit off topic... You are a specialist in Turkish literature and Turkey. How is it that you ended up editing a book on Sudanese literature?

Laurent Mignon: First of all, it should be pointed out that I am the only literary scholar in the Middle East Centre, the research centre to which I am attached in my college at Oxford. So, it was quite natural that the director of the Sudanese programme, Ahmed Al-Shahi, turned to me when organising the conference and then when preparing the book. But I will confess that I asked myself the same question. There were many people in other departments and centres of the university who were far more qualified than I was. On the other hand, I must admit that looking back on what I have written over the last twenty years, whether it be academic, journalistic or literary, there has always been an African presence. Having said that, how could one consider oneself an internationalist and not carry a bit of Africa in one's heart.

Giulio-Enrico Pisani: Thank you for your clarifications, Laurent! I hope that your work will meet all the interest that it deserves, as much from the literary and cultural point of view, as from the international geopolitical point of view, these two aspects being much more interconnected and interactive than one thinks.