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## Samah Selim, Ph.D.

Literary Studies

**IREMAM**

Born in 1966 in Egypt

Studied English Literature at Barnard College, New York and

Arabic Literature at Columbia University, New York

FELLOWSHIP

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### PROJECT

## "The People's Entertainments": Popular Fiction and the Politics of Translation in Egypt (1904-1911)

My project focuses on popular Arabic fiction in the first decade of the twentieth century; a period when the novel itself was a threshold genre generating intense debate about the structure of modern narrative and its social role in a cultural context defined by reformism and the colonial encounter. The broader aim of the project is twofold: 1) to interrogate the Eurocentric teleology that informs the writing of modern Arabic literary history and of high nationalist canon discourse and 2) to construct a new critical language through which to read and recuperate a seminal literary archive that has been suppressed by the modern Arabic canon.

Translation, as practice and culture discourse, intersects the project's broader framework at critical junctures. In a gesture that reflects the ambivalence of postcolonial modernisms, the popular Arabic novel of the period is mostly dismissed as a historical instance of the culturally irresponsible adaptation of mass-market "foreign" fictions ("foreign" here denoting concepts of both the European cultural other and local popular traditions and readerships). By building on contemporary translation theory and (post)structuralist studies of popular genres like romance and melodrama, I try to disentangle possible readings of these texts from ideologically loaded projections of authorship, originality and imitation, as well as from the hegemonic literary realisms that are produced by national literature approaches in both the European and Arab contexts. In the process, I hope to contribute to discussions about the worldly circulation of the novel genre across national and "cultural" borders.

### Recommended Reading

Selim, Samah. *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985*. London: Routledge Press, 2004.

-. "The Nahda, Popular Fiction and the Politics of Translation." *MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* 4 (Fall 2004): 71-90.

-. "The Narrative Craft: Fiction and Realism in the Arabic Canon." *Edebiyat* 14, 1 & 2 (Winter 2003): 109-128.

# Pharao's Revenge: Translation, Literary History and 'The Colonial Difference'

My talk will summarize some of the main issues that I am wrestling with in my book on popular Arabic fiction and the politics of translation at the turn of the 20th century; a period that is generally considered to represent the pre-history of the Arabic novel.

The book focuses on a specific fiction serial - The People's Entertainments (Musamarat al-Sha'b) - that was published in Cairo in monthly and bi-weekly installments between 1904 and 1911, and that featured adaptations of European novels as well as pseudotranslations and some original work. In national literary history, the enormous body of pre-bildungsroman fiction that was produced in Arabic from the middle of the 19th century to the second decade of the 20th is largely dismissed as a problematic and negligible stage in the assimilation, or 'translation' of modern European literary forms.

In my presentation I will critique this normative national model of literary history by arguing that translation has historically been a central activity of all literary cultures, especially if we abandon Romantic categories of 'purity' and 'originality' in relation to literary production.

In the second part of the presentation, I will discuss a specific translation published in the Entertainments in 1906, as a way of illustrating the political and social tensions and complicities provoked by literary translation across the colonial divide. This is a translation of a now forgotten Edwardian bestseller - Pharos the Egyptian (1899) - by the Australian author Guy Newell Boothby. The novel belongs to the popular subgenre of Edwardian fiction called 'Imperial Gothic' or even more precisely 'Invasion Fantasy Fiction'. I will discuss the historical contexts of this subgenre in late Victorian England as well as those of its Arabic translation.

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## PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Selim, Samah (Abingdon, 2009)

Nation and translation in the Middle East : histories, canons, hegemoies

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1690061480>

Selim, Samah (2009)

Die Aussichten des Kulturkampfs in den Zeiten der Globalisierung

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=670712469>

Selim, Samah (2009)

Di/Visions - eine Einführung

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=670712434>

Selim, Samah (New York [u.a.], 2004)

The novel and the rural imaginary in Egypt : 1880 - 1985

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=368150194>

RoutledgeCurzon studies in Arabic and Middle Eastern literatures ; [6]

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=368150194>