

Introduction

As early as 1834, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi¹ devoted an entire chapter of his work *Taḥlīs al-ibrīz fi talḥīs bārīz* about the description of Paris, to food and the culinary habits of the city's inhabitants.² In the same period, Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq presents a satirical account of the rough table manners of Druze villagers, the frugality of monks and the poor reception of guests among the English in three chapters of his literary monument *al-Sāq 'alā al-sāq* (1855).³ In the 20th century literature, Naguib Mahfouz describes in his *Tulāṭīyya* (1956–57), the tense atmosphere of the family meal and, in contrast, the relaxed coffee hour that brings together the mother and her children, far from the tyranny of the father. Many of Yusuf Idris' black comedies are about food and eating. We remember his cunning penniless character in the short story *Tablīyya min al-samā'* (1958), who strikes at his fellow villagers and threatens to blaspheme in public if God does not bring down to him a table covered with food.⁴ We also think about the prodigious descriptions of coffee in the texts of Mahmoud Darwish, which praise the poet's almost sacred relationship with this beverage;⁵ the chapter al-Ḥabīz [Baking] of the novel *Ayyām al-insān al-sab'a* (1969) by Abd al-Hakim Qasim, which, in the intimate and secret sphere of women, depicts the eternal ritual of baking in the Egyptian countryside; the scenes of joy of Iraqi immigrants around a traditional meal in *Sawāqī al-qulūb* (2005) by Inaam Kachachi; the tasty images of dishes carefully prepared by mothers, wives or mistresses in *Maryam al-ḥakāyā* (2002) by Alawiya Sobh; *Muḥmal* (2016) by Huzama Habayeb, or *Kamā yanbaḡī li-nahr* (2003) by Manhal al-Sarraj, among others; and the long passage describing the ecstatic pleasure of the narrator slowly tasting his chocolate offered by a woman in the short story *Šarāḥa* (2011) by Abbas Beydoun.⁶ And the examples never end ...

However, when starting to explore the scholarship produced on this subject, one comes up against an unexpected reality, especially in the case of modern literature. Middle Eastern food is a well-studied topic from cultural, religious,

1 All the names of Arabic authors in this introduction are written in their standard form in Latin letters, not in transcription from Arabic.

2 Part three, ch. 5. This work was written during the author's stay in Paris between 1826–1831.

3 Volume 1, ch. 6 and 12 and volume 3, ch. 6, respectively.

4 From the collection *Ḥādīṭat šaraf* [A Matter of Honor] (1958).

5 See *Ḍākira li-l-nisyan* (originally published in 1986) [Eng. *A Memory for Forgetfulness*, 2013].

6 From the collection *Marāyā Frankištāyn* [Frankenstein's Mirrors] (2011).

economic, or social angles.⁷ In literature, there is a good share of research on the classical texts, including Geert Jan van Gelder's excellent work, *Of Dishes and Discourse: Classical Arabic Literary Representation of Food*, published in 2000, which addresses this topic in a variety of texts ranging from pre-Islamic poetry to *Adab* anthologies.⁸ Other examples of research on the classical corpus are the numerous studies on bacchic poetry⁹ and on medieval cookbooks.¹⁰ As for modern literature, the choices are much more restricted. No book-length study has been produced on food so far, rather a few essays. The article of Sabry Hafez "Food as a Semiotic Code in Arabic Literature", first published in 1994, seems to be the earliest in-depth literary analysis on this theme to date. In this essay, Hafez shows how food operates in modern texts within a network of social and cultural relations.¹¹ Two more recent papers could be named as well: Simone Sibilio's "The Aroma of the Land. Maḥmūd Darwīsh's Geopolitics of Coffee" (2015), which deals with this beverage as a vector of discourse on identity and memory in the works of the Palestinian poet,¹² and the essay of Christian Junge "Food, Body, Society: al-Shidyāq's Somatic Experience of Nineteenth-Century Communities" (2020) in which the consumption of food and its corporal experience in Shidyāq's autofictional travelogue are discussed as a means of interaction between the body and the society.¹³ It is also worth mentioning the contribution in Italian by Rosalia Bivona, *La mensa in scena magrebina, ovvero il cibo come pre-testo narrativo* [The Maghrebin staging, that is, food as a narrative pretext], published in 2005, that explores the culinary world in French-speaking North African literature.¹⁴

The purpose of the present book therefore is manifold. First of all, it aims to offer the first scholarly volume that focuses on food in modern Arabic literature

7 See, for example, Dmitriev, Kirill, Hauser, Julia and Orfali, Bilal (eds), *Insatiable Appetite*, 2020, Zubaida, Sami and Tapper, Richard (eds), *A Taste of Thyme*, 2000, and Freidenreich, David M., *Foreigners and Their Food*, 2011. The academic corpus is much larger if we include studies on food and culinary codes in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey.

8 Gelder, Geert Jan van, *Of Dishes and Discourse*, 2000. See also Pitchon, Véronique, "Le faste de la table dans la poésie abbasside", 2021, and Ghersetti, Antonella, "En quête de nourriture", 2004.

9 See, for example, Kennedy, Philippe F., *The Wine Song in Classical Arabic Poetry*, 1997.

10 For an overview of critical studies on food in classical literature, see Gelder, *Of Dishes and Discourse*, 1–3.

11 Hafez, Sabry, "Food as a Semiotic Code in Arabic Literature", 2006.

12 Sibilio, Simone, "The Aroma of the Land. Maḥmūd Darwīsh's Geopolitics of Coffee", 2015.

13 Junge, Christian, "Food, Body, Society: al-Shidyāq's Somatic Experience of Nineteenth-Century Communities", 2020.

14 Bivona, Rosalia, *La mensa in scena magrebina*, 2005. One of the nine chapters of the book deals with food in North African cinema. There is also a Master thesis on food in French-speaking Algerian literature, Ouhaar, Thoraya, *Écriture et nourriture*, 2015 (unpublished).

and investigates its various forms and functions. It also attempts to see how approaches to food and eating in Arabic narratives engage with the broader area of literary food studies and hence allows Arabic literature to be set within the landscape of global literary studies. Moreover, the volume aims to contribute to the research on the Arab world beyond the literary field thanks to the multifaceted and intersectional nature of both food and literature. In ten chapters, the volume covers a corpus of mainly novels and short stories produced between the 1950s and the second decade of the 2000s by Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian, and Moroccan authors. One of the chapters deals with two plays and another one with Young Adult literature. The volume includes essays in both English and French, with the aim of bringing together specialists from various scientific backgrounds and university affiliations within a single project.

Contrary to the state of research on Arabic literary production, the semiotics of food in general, or what is called literary food studies, is a vast field that has attracted enormous academic attention although food has only recently emerged as a topic in literary and cultural studies.¹⁵ J. Michelle Coghlan attributes the origin of the field of food studies to the pioneering works by anthropologists Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in the 1960s and 1970s when “food came to matter in new ways”, she argues.¹⁶ To these early works, we can add the cultural essays of Roland Barthe in *Mythologies* (1957), on the semiology of the meal in contemporary France.¹⁷ In 1991, in his selection of references entitled “Food in Literature”, Norman Kjell introduced no less than 52 pages of bibliographical entries, mainly research in English and French, on this theme.¹⁸ Since then, the number of scholarly works on food in literature has significantly increased. Various thematic elements are associated with food itself, such as foodstuffs and food supplies, the act of eating as an organic or social activity, hunger and starvation, food habits and culinary uses, to mention only a few. It is thus usual to follow a multidisciplinary approach when dealing with food in literary texts. In their large study on the topic, Piatti-Farnell and Brien categorize anglophone literary studies on food according to their focus into: “individual studies focusing on particular literary nationalities and geographical contexts and their representations of food; analyses of food and eating in the works of specific authors; broader critical evaluations on the value of food representations in

15 Fitzpatrick, Joan, “Food and Literature: An Overview”, 125.

16 Coghlan, Michelle J. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Food*, 2020, 2.

17 Barthe, *Mythologies*, 1957, see especially “Le vin et le lait” and “Le bifteck et les frites”, 69–74.

18 Kjell, Norman, “Food in Literature”, 1991.

literature and culture, especially in relation to preoccupations such as gender, ethnicity, and genre; and a growing number of volumes, either single-authored or edited, that have explored the presence of food in the literary productions of particular historical periods".¹⁹

So, what do these studies tell us? Literary characters do not need to eat to stay "alive", claims Mervyn Nicholson; and yet they do eat.²⁰ Research shows that food in literary texts plays a role that often goes beyond its vital utility. More than to be eaten, food in literature is integrated into a somewhat complex network of meanings, and performs many symbolic functions. Literary food studies have therefore investigated the intersection of food with a wide variety of subjects, which Coghlan summarizes quite rightly with the following words: "food has long served as a cultural marker of complex and oft-conflicting desires, affiliations, and identities – national belonging and regional attachments, class distinctions and racial stereotypes, gender norms and sexual appetites, agricultural policies and imperial legacies, public agendas and personal tastes".²¹

Although all the chapters of this volume are dedicated to food, they approach this subject from different angles. A few of them focus on a single food item, such as milk (Chapter 7), meat (Chapter 10) or bread (Chapter 8), others on several types. Some focus on raw nourishment or animals as food (Chapters 5, 6 and 10), others on fairly sophisticated culinary preparations (Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4), or, on the contrary, on the lack of food (Chapters 8 and 9). The literary texts studied by the contributors are also of different lengths, ranging from a two-page short story for one of the chapters, to a novel of a few hundred

19 Piatti-Farnell, Lorna and Brien, Donna-Lee (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food*, 2018, 1, for references in the above mentioned areas.

20 Nicholson, Mervyn, "Food and Power: Homer, Carroll, Atwood and Others", 1987, 38.

21 Coghlan, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Food*, 2020, 1. For literary critical works that explored food from a variety of angles see the exhaustive study of Piatti-Farnell and Brien (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food*, 2018 and Shahani, Gitanjali G. (ed.), *Food and Literature*, 2018. Coghlan includes a selected guide of anglophone studies on food and literature based on various criteria, including literary periods, themes, genres, theoretical approaches etc., Coghlan, 262–278. Fitzpatrick traces an overview of the field of literary criticism on food and its development, considering the texts, authors, genres, and themes that have been the focus of attention, and the theoretical trajectory of such criticism, among others, Fitzpatrick, Joan, "Food and literature: An overview" in *The Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies*, edited by Ken Abala, 2013, 122–134. For literary and cultural studies on food in the French and German languages, see, for example, Becker, Karin, *Gastronomie et littérature*, 2017, 181–186.

pages, or even to several novels in some cases. These texts reflect various styles; realist, grotesque or surrealist, among others. In terms of literary analysis, the authors have also followed different methodological strategies. The latter range from a semiotic analysis, very close to the text, to thematic approaches, carrying out a comparison or a synthesis of several textual fragments or works. Some chapters focus more than others on the poetics of the literary text and its esthetics strictly speaking, while others favor the multidisciplinary dimension.

The findings of this study address multiple topics that intersect with scholarly criticism on food in literature. However, three major thematic axes especially, but not exclusively, emerge from this volume, namely food as an identity marker, eating animals and the human-animal boundary, and food as a tool of political and social control. All three are well-known areas in literary food studies.²² Yet in Arabic narratives, these topics are shaped by the local setting and characteristics of the region. Indeed, literature being the mirror of the context in which it is produced, the representation of food in the studied Arabic texts is no doubt the reflection of the modern political, social and economic history of the Arab world and its cultural specificities, be it colonialism, authoritarian regimes, armed conflicts, emigration and exile, economic disparity and poverty, social constraints, varied cultural influences and contemporary issues, such as women rights, the rights of minorities and the ecological question, among other things. Finally, the culinary variety and gastronomic richness of the Middle East are of course present on the Arabic literary scene.

Let us now move on to a more detailed presentation of the chapters, thematically divided into three sections, noting that many chapters cover more than these themes. It is also worth mentioning that these three themes seem to be linked both to the countries of origin of the studied texts and to the literary characteristics of their authors. Thus, it is not surprising that food is underlined as an identity marker in Lebanese fiction, a large share of which is dedicated to the themes of exile and ethnic or regional belonging. The same goes for the representation of hunger, lack of food and related topics in Egyptian literature, that focuses on issues of poverty and disadvantaged social classes in Egypt.

22 Food and identity is a widely explored topic in literary narratives on national and group identities, migration and exile (Diner 2001, Bégin 2016, Halloran 2016, Becker 2017, Kashdan 2018, Pan 2018). As for animals as food, this subject is approached from different angles in literature, such as ecocritical, historical or anthropological, among others (Bain 2018, Tromanhauser 2014, Keyser 2020). Finally, literary themes on food and political control or food and social inequities, including hunger and starvation, are usually, but not exclusively, discussed within both postcolonial studies (Collins 1998, Roy 2020, Highfield 2020, Bahri 2018, Githire 2014, Rich 2007) and in literary and non-literary critiques of ecology and environmental justice (Wald 2020, Fiskio 2002, Alkon and Agyeman 2011).

On the other hand, food deprivation described in the studied Moroccan novel or animals as food in the Syrian texts have more to do with the thematic peculiarities of the authors in question, than with their respective national literatures.

1 Food and Identity, War, and Other Subjects

The first four chapters explore the theme of food among Lebanese authors in stories set in urban, village or exile settings. Food is particularly studied in the context of the civil war (1975–90). Its connections with identity, memory and war are among the main issues in these contributions. Food essentially corresponds to dishes and culinary preparations (is that due to the sophisticated gastronomical culture in the country?). These chapters also address to a greater or lesser degree the interaction of food and gender and food and sexuality.

Devoted to the novels of Alawiya Sobh and Rachid El-Daïf, **Chapter 1** (S. Boustani) is a good introduction to our subject since it provides an overview of different functions related to food in literature, namely food in relation to identity, memory, gender, and sexuality. The author approaches food as a sign in a network of meanings, and refers to C. Lévi-Strauss, among others, who defines food as “a language in which society unconsciously translates its structure”. In the studied novels, the family meal is a coded and meaningful ritual, in which the dishes are ranked. Food is an identity marker for the characters, indicating their geographical location and their social class. The relationship to food reflects the psychology of the characters, their superstitions, and their link with the past. Moreover, food codes act as an indication of cultural transformation and sometimes reveal a perceived modernity imposed on the protagonists. Food also expresses the political climate and how it is reflected in people’s daily lives. In two novels published during and after the war, respectively, the function of food varies from a marker of crisis in the first, to a marker of conviviality and prosperity in the second. Finally, for the two novelists, the culinary art is the domain of women: “She finds a space there where she can show off her skills, express her affection and exercise her power,” as the chapter’s author tells us.

We move on to Young Adult literature in **Chapter 2** (A. Ottosson Al-Bitar). Based on the characteristics of this literary genre, which is quite recent in Arabic fiction, the author examines the connection between food and identity in two novels: *Cappuccino* (2017) and *Ijāṣat Mīlā* [*Mila’s Pear*] (2019) by Fatima Sharafeddine. These stories present young characters who live in 21st-century Beirut, in the context of digital social networks and a Westernized style of life.

They struggle in different ways to find their place in society. In the first novel, the theme of food and food choices is part of a conflicting opposition between a modernity represented by the young protagonists, and a traditional society with patriarchal values. In this context, the chapter discusses, among other things, the function of food whereabouts, such as the kitchen, coffee shops and restaurants. The second novel places food at the center of the plot through the theme of eating disorders. Under the pressure of a contemporary image of beauty conveyed by the internet and social media, the young protagonist decides to lose weight and gradually deprives herself of food. She thus goes through an infernal journey of anorexia, before ending up in hospital in order to survive and begin therapy. Instead of being a source of nourishment, food in this story is a source of suffering. The chapter's author however shows that this novel includes some ambiguity in the way it promotes autonomy for young people with regard to the discussed topic.

Chapter 3 (M. Censi) also deals with the Lebanese context in the novel *Sīnālkūl* (2012) by Elias Khoury. This contribution places the link between food and identity in the perspective of war, exile, and return. The author studies the role of food in restoring the past, drawing inspiration from C. Bardenstein's study on this subject. She explains that from the beginning of the novel, food helps to trigger a process of recollection that links the protagonist, an immigrant in France, to his origins. "Within the distance imposed by exile, food becomes fragments of memory, just like photos, images or songs", recalls the author. Food that is connected with the homeland acquires a new meaning when it is eaten in exile. Its reference to identity is not limited to the context of exile, but also concerns national affiliations and marks the differences between the two urban centers of Lebanon, Beirut and Tripoli. Furthermore, the chapter shows that food references in this novel also play an important role in the construction of gender and the sexuality of the characters. Some dishes are associated with the image of authentic masculinity, others with femininity. Finally, coffee carries various meanings depending on the way the protagonist prepares and consumes it, each time with a different woman.

We remain in the atmosphere of the civil war in **Chapter 4** (T. Al Saadi) that studies the novel *Ḥaḡar al-ḍaḡik* [*The Stone of Laughter*] (1990) by Hoda Barakat, which uses food to inform about war as a temporal experience. The essay emphasizes the role of food as a regulating element in a chaotic temporality. Acting as an "autonomous code", to use the terms of Sabry Hafez, food and culinary activities intervene in the tormented world of the story to highlight the altered perception of time, establish a rhythm, or fill the empty hours of the day. In other words, food is studied as a chronological process that replaces a defective or non-existent temporality in the story. The chapter devotes a

section to the ambivalent image of coffee in the context of persons displaced by war. With a dual temporal function linked to both the past and the future, coffee marks the presence of absent people, reveals their traces, and predicts their future. This beverage thus creates new temporal landmarks. In addition to the functional role of food, this chapter examines several literary figures inspired by food and culinary codes in the narrative, such as the theme of decomposition that embodies the degraded character of the time in question, or that of nausea and disgust that reflects the protagonist's rejection of the world around him. Finally, culinary items of strong sentimental value for the protagonist are given human characteristics in this text.

2 Eating Animals

Animals as food, human-animal boundary, and the vacillating position of food between nature and culture, are among the main questions of chapters 5, 6 and 7. All three contributions are devoted to Syrian fiction, and they suggest an environmental approach to the topic, among others.

Through a detailed semiotic analysis of an extremely brief short story by Zakariyya Tamir entitled *al-Farīsa* [*The Prey*] (1979), **Chapter 5** (H. Toelle) considers the representation of food in the critical and subversive vision of the Syrian writer, distinguished by the use of the grotesque, ambiguity, and ambivalence. After highlighting the strange and implausible characteristics of the story, the author comments on the contradictory aspect of food as an element that makes the one who consumes it live, but also the one who is consumed, in this case a fish-man, die. This character sacrifices himself by falling into the nets of a fisherman and agrees to serve as a meal for the children of the latter, making himself both prey and martyr. Based on the semiotic square developed by A. J. Greimas and l'École de Paris, the author also addresses the role of the four elements – water, fire, air, earth – in the story, particularly in relation to the various transformations undergone by the character as food (fish) in a cycle of life and death. The discussion in this way opens up a reflection about animals as food.

Other texts by Zakariyya Tamir are analyzed in **Chapter 6** (P. Dové). These are short stories taken from the collection *al-Qunfud* [*The Hedgehog*] (2005) and a short story from the collection *al-Ra'd* [*The Thunder*] (1970), which take up a theme that is precious to the Syrian novelist, that of childhood. The three texts analyzed revolve around the question of eating animals. By borrowing concepts related to child psychology and animal ethics, this chapter shows that the consumption of meat acquires a particular meaning in connection

with the transition to adulthood. In other terms, there is an “initiation into the world of adults” through food, in the words of the author. Eating meat thus is part of two opposing visions of the human-animal relation that the chapter tries to demonstrate: the empathetic gaze of the child and that of the adults characterized by the exploitation of the animal. The author also signals that the transition from the child to the adult world is parallel to the evolution of humanity and its relationship to animals, the gazelle in the studied works. These texts could accordingly be read as a condemnation of human violence and a critique of modernity.

We also find the ecocritical vein in **Chapter 7** (F. Lang) which studies the role and symbolism of milk in the novel *Sarmada* (2011) by the Syrian Fadi Azzam. The representation of this substance in the novel is explored through several concepts drawn from multi-species ethnography, and science and technology studies. The story takes place in a Druze village haunted by supernatural phenomena. Triggered by the malicious killing of the best cow in the village, which is paralleled by the murder of a young woman who transgressed patriarchal traditions, a series of mysterious events strike the village over several generations. Milk in both raw and transformed forms plays a central role, symbolizing the link and the common point between the human body and that of the animal, or the man-animal, according to the author’s terms. This is why milk acquires an ambiguous image in this text, both blessed and impure. Through the symbolism of milk, the author highlights a theme that runs through the story, namely the interconnection between different species, and between these species and the earth. Moreover, milk in the analyzed fiction is involved in many practices, including food production and consumption, therapy, sexuality, and reproduction. This chapter suggests, finally, that literature, as an alternative means of production of knowledge, helps to question the fundamentals of Western scientific culture by abolishing the boundaries between species, and by rethinking the human body and its relationship with the environment.

3 Food, Hunger and Social Inequities

The last three chapters, 8, 9 and 10, bring us to a common theme, closely related to food, or rather its absence. The issues of hunger, starvation and undernourishment are the subject of these contributions which deal with fiction and theater texts by one Moroccan and two Egyptian authors. They tackle, among other things, food as an instrument of political and social control.

It is through a postcolonial approach that **Chapter 8** (A. González Navarro and G. Fernández Parrilla) analyzes the theme of hunger in the autobiographical

novel *al-Ḥubz al-ḥāfi* (1982) [Eng. *For Bread Alone*] by the Moroccan Mohamed Choukri. In a colonial environment devastated by extreme poverty, the authors show that bread, being the only element of survival and remedy for hunger, acquires a symbolic value connected both to the needs of the body and to human dignity. Its absence thus becomes a source of daily violence and humiliation. To compensate for the feeling of hunger and suffering, the protagonist resorts to several strategies: vomiting, sexuality and, finally, writing. In other words, the authors assert that “these strategies related to expulsion, liberation, and cathartic processes, act as way out from hunger, poverty, violence, abandonment, and exclusion”. Indeed, the chapter shows that vomiting is not only a somatic act, but a kind of purge for the protagonist. As for the latter’s greedy sexuality, it not only aims to compensate for his physical and psychological shortcomings, but also allows him to earn money for food. On the other hand, the *churro*, a Spanish culinary specialty introduced into Morocco by the colonists, and mentioned many times in the texts of Choukri, is a food code symbolizing the colonial presence and reflecting the link between food and deprivation in this novel; a deprivation that renders the writings of the Moroccan author into a form of resistance and commitment, as we are told at the end of this chapter.

The discussion about the lack of food continues in **Chapter 9** (A. Barbaro) which examines global hunger in three works by the novelist and playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim; namely the short story *Fī sanat malyūn* [*In the Year One Million*] (1952) and the two plays; *Rihla ilā al-ḡad* [*Voyage to Tomorrow*] (1958) and *al-Ṭā’ām li-kull fam* [*Food for Every Mouth*] (1963). Starting from a discussion on hunger in world literature, this essay draws a parallel between the perspective of Anglo-Irish author Swift and al-Hakim’s vision on this topic. It suggests that with hybrid literary forms inspired essentially by science fiction, and associating the imaginary and the surreal, al-Hakim presents proposals to eradicate hunger in the world. To achieve this goal, the path chosen in these texts is that of science and technological progress which, in an imaginary future, contribute to the creation of an alternative diet based on synthetic nutrition, among others. But the control of hunger turns out to be an instrument of political power which, instead of saving the world and making it more equitable, aims to subjugate the population or to annihilate it. The elimination of hunger in these stories is carried out by stripping human beings of all their physical and mental capacities, in other words by depriving them of their humanity. These texts also denounce a form of life subject to materialism and machines. Thus, al-Hakim’s literary proposals contain a dystopian dimension

implying that equitable access to food is only an illusion. The author of the chapter further compares al-Hakim's approach, mainly his depiction of food and hunger from a futuristic perspective, to similar literary examples from world narratives, including works of science fiction, dystopian literature, speculative fiction, horror and fantasy.

We also find the question of food control in the final **Chapter 10** (H. Fährndrich), which focuses on food supply. Dedicated to the short story *Harq al-dam* [*Boiling Blood*] (1973) by the Egyptian author Muhammad Mustagab, this essay deals with the access of a disadvantaged social class to decent food, in this case meat. The author comments on the theme of food, especially meat, in Mustagab's writing. He analyzes the text in question according to the theoretical definition of the short story as a literary genre, on the one hand, and based on the stylistic uses specific to Mustagab, such as the use of humor and the grotesque, on the other. The studied text is about workers in the mines who decide to create a collaborative project in order to appropriate their meat supply instead of depending on unscrupulous butchers from the neighboring village, and thus improve their daily diet. Their plan is to raise funds to buy animals, slaughter them themselves, and distribute the meat at affordable prices. They divide the task by forming groups to take care of each step. But corruption and venality quickly infiltrate the work to divert the profits for the benefit of administrators and political notables, and the project ends in failure. More than an essential element of human nutrition, meat in this fiction is a way to denounce not only corruption in the Egyptian context, but also the exploitation and food deprivation of the poor by the privileged classes.

Here we are at the end of the presentation of this book, which, as stated, aims to be a first and modest initiative dedicated to food in modern Arabic literature, and to arouse, hopefully, new academic interest in this field. To strengthen and broaden our body of knowledge, not only could more narratives on the studied topics and genres be investigated but also new approaches, themes, literary genres, and geographical or historical contexts that could not be included in the present work. Food in relation to gender and sexuality, for instance, is a large area of study in literary food criticism, yet it has not been sufficiently examined in this volume due to the choice of texts, which happened to focus on other issues. Much also remains to be done on food in poetry or in contemporary theater works, food in graphic novels, or in specific thematic areas, such as prison literature, and texts on religious rituals and ceremonies. Additionally, literary food studies offer a wide range of perspectives that could be explored in Arabic writings, including feminist, ethnic or psychological

approaches to food, eating habits and consumption in modern society, attitudes to foreign food in contemporary texts, food in children's literature – the menu is long.²³

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November 2023

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23 Note: Between the completion of the introduction of the present volume and its actual publication, the academic journal *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* published an issue on food from an interdisciplinary perspective in different cultures, including the Middle East. See *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 44 (2024). Cairo, American University in Cairo Press.

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