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Freedom from the Margins: The Practice of Existential Aesthetics

During the cultural cold war, Lebanese writers found themselves torn between Marxism and existentialism: the first seemed to promise programmatic and inclusive agendas for change, while the second would work against Marxism's supposed restriction of individual freedom. The debate hinged on the two terms "ilzam" (compulsion) and "iltizam" (commitment), and unfolded through conversations with Sartre. In between the two terms, writers negotiated their own tension between aesthetic detachment and writerly responsibility. These negotiations unfolded in translations and literary journals and debated the social form and relevance of the aesthetic experience. The writers experienced these struggles across transnational alliances and through a consciously global framework: they did not think that they were borrowing other's "modernities." Rather they thought of their work as critically participating in a global conversation about the social relevance of the aesthetic experience. Repeatedly in their manifestos, they represented local literature as partaking in world – making, their own and others. In the many Arab writers' conferences, they expressed solidarity with writers across the global south while also translating Sartre, Beauvoir and Pound with no introductions or citation marks to set them apart from the local literature; rather, what we see is that these aesthetics from the supposed "margins" saw themselves as participating in a global discourse on the social function of the aesthetic experience. In this paper, I focus especially on two figures – Lebanese Suhail Idris and Layla Baalbaki – who produced existentialist novels inspired by Sartre and Beauvoir but mobilized the concept of freedom (*hurriyya*) differently. I examine the debates in prominent journals around the time of the novels' publication, to situate the fiction in relation to the directives laid out in the journals. I am interested in how they understood the aesthetic versus aesthesis (feeling), and how the forms they produce navigate these two while proposing a distinctly vernacular definition of freedom (both of the writer and the subject of aesthetics). The talk ends by commenting on the broader philosophy of practice of aesthetics from the margins in the region.