

THEMATIC ISSUE:
PANDORA'S BOX AS A METAPHOR FOR THE CRISIS
IN CONTEMPORARY ARABIC FICTION AND DRAMA

INTRODUCTION

Pandora's box can be interpreted as a metaphor for the consequences of curiosity, and serves as a warning to keep away from what should remain unknown. Like this popular myth, the Arab revolutions may be seen as a catalyst for a series of events that had unintended and sometimes unforeseen consequences. The events of the Arab revolutions, for example, have certainly contributed to the spread of political unrest and instability in the region, as well as to the overall turbulence and conflict that has characterised the Middle East and North Africa in the years since. In other words, Arab revolutions – it could be argued – came in a box containing both hope and destruction. This idea, which is embodied in a significant number of Arab artistic works from the last decade, is arguably reminiscent of the myth of Pandora as many representations of the revolution and their aftermath are depicted both as a gift and a tragedy. As it is especially clear in Egypt and Tunisia, not only several social issues raised by the revolution could often not be solved, but also new ones emerged after the revolutions. Deriving from representational problems, divergent visions of modernity, and a difficult democratic transition, issues such as illegal migration, terrorism, repression, and a severe financial crisis have been widely re-elaborated in the arts. Once opened, Pandora's box could not be closed, leaving a legacy of disillusionment and disenchantment for future generations.

Moreover, this process of revolution has also brought to the forefront artistic expressions that are often socially and politically engaged. The revolutionary libertarian ethos is also symbolically expressed in a liberation of the word. It takes shape in a literary and paraliterary movement where artists are keen to articulate a discourse *vis-à-vis* political and social issues that often denounce the evils of society, and where the spoken language is increasingly present and almost legitimised as a literary language. In other words, the post-revolutionary trauma and situations of crisis, more generally, have often been depicted by Arab artists as a desire for a radical re-discussion of identity and modernity that has freed pre-existing evils until then contained by repressive governments. These representations allow the readers to understand and reflect upon the complexities of contemporary post-revolutionary experience and life.

Keeping in mind both the myth of Pandora's box and the renovated context of Arab artistic production of the last decade, this thematic issue investigates how recent Arab artistic expressions are in dialogue with a post-

revolutionary polyphony, as «a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses»¹, how art interacts with the revolution, and how it contributes to its discourse not only in Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, but in Europe as well. Contributions focus on recent Egyptian, Tunisian and Syrian novels, Syrian theatre in Europe, more generally Arab theatre, and Iraqi narrative. Art is here understood as a site of intellectual reflection oriented towards the creation of the image of a common identity and destiny that can also serve to investigate the role of ordinary people in the construction and negotiation of national identity in a state of exception. In return, we question the role of art and cultural production within the revolutionary and post-revolutionary process. This issue also aims at discussing the specificity of different artistic genres with their local and global impact. Finally, art is here meant not only as a narration of the past, but also as a tool allowing us to see and understand the present in its tension towards the future.

The analogies between Pandora's earth "full of evils" and Muḥammad Rabī's *Uṭārid* (2014) are the focus of Léa Polverini's contribution, which emphasises the way post-revolutionary Egypt is mirrored in the novel by a strong disillusionment evocative of contemporary Egypt. The dystopic world of 2025 Cairo is devoid of reason, and no one is held accountable for horrific acts. Calamity reigns, evil has become the norm, and moral considerations have disappeared. Egypt's geography reveals this paradigm shift, as Cairo becomes a trap-city, surrounding its inhabitants, embodying a new Pandora's box. Another famous Egyptian post-2011 dystopia, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ* (The Exit Door, 2012) by 'Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, is studied by Angelika Palmegiani, who investigates the author's stylistic choices and their modes of representation of the traumatic effects of the Egyptian revolution at the individual level as well as in the social relations. From the title, it would be easy to imagine the Egyptian revolution as an exit door, but this article demonstrates that there is no optimism associated with it. Instead, the narration gradually becomes overshadowed by a sense of sadness and sorrow. The present-day reality of Egypt is absorbed into the fictional narrative as an expression of current anxieties.

With Annamaria Bianco's contribution, the focus goes to the Syrian context. Her essay analyses the entanglement of trauma and revolution in Dīmāh Wannūs's novel *al-Ḥā'ifūn*. Syrian citizens are seen as suffering from fear, anxiety, and distress following the revolution due to the chaotic aftermath, which stirs suppressed memories, creates new injuries, and fragments social bonds. Bianco uses Trauma Studies to approach the intimate love story of the protagonists – two Syrian patients of a Damascene therapist – and their psychological fallout after living under a brutal dictatorship in a bitterly riven

¹ M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, edited and translated by C. Emerson, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 1984, p. 6.

post-revolutionary society. Trauma Studies are also at the core of Mona Merhi's contribution, relating the play *'Awdat Dāntūn* (The Return of Danton, 2021) by Syrian playwright Muḍar al-Ḥaḡḡī to the concept of "Scar without Skin" (*plaié sans peau*). Using the rehearsal space from Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death* as a starting point, the play engages with the momentum of the Syrian revolt and personal accounts of Syrian exiles. Revolutions are here viewed as haunting processes whose un-utterance is considered as an act of (non-)remembrance. Other examples from post-2011 Arab theatre (by Laylā Sulaymān, Dāliyā Basyūnī, Wā'il Qaddūr, Ḥanān Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī, and Sulaymān al-Bassām) are provided by Daniela Potenza, who bases her study on the idea of the blurring of the dividing line between theatrical/hyperreal realities and Arab politics. Analysing some Egyptian, Syrian, Lebanese and more generically Arab plays whose texts are, in different ways and for different reasons, in continuous metamorphosis, this paper links recent theatrical writing aesthetics to the social crisis – the Pandora's box – characterising many Arab societies especially after 2011.

Andrea Maria Negri's contribution scrutinises the representation of the revolution in three Tunisian novels published between 2011 and 2016: Ḥusayn al-Wād's *Sa'ādātu-hu... al-sayyid al-wazīr* (His Excellency... Mr Minister, 2011), Šukrī Mabḥūt's *al-Ṭālyānī* (The Italian, 2015), and Aymān al-Dabbūsī's *Intiṣāb aswad* (Black Rising, 2016). This article also shows how literature can be a space to renegotiate different forms of identity and to articulate social transformation. The three works reflect and construct the sense and purpose of the revolution and illustrate the entwinement of politics and the hope for change. Progressively, utopian and mythological views of the revolutionary event give way to a disenchanting perspective. Antonio Pacifico's paper focuses on Muḥsin al-Ramlī to highlight the (re)emergence of ethno-religious identities in Iraqī literature especially since the March 1991 political uprisings, the sanctions era and the fall of the Baathist regime. Those renewed topics lead to debates in the literary field to such an extent that some writers saw the phase following the American invasion and the fall of the former regime as a sort of Pandora's box that released all the evils related to Iraq's ethno-religious identities and divides.

Andrea Maria Negri, Daniela Potenza