



Alifa Rifaat - Egypt



Alifa Rifaat, author of «Distant View of a Minaret and other stories», began to write early. When she was nine she wrote her first story, about the village where her family lived in the summer.

While much of her later writing is deeply rooted in her experience, the most important theme in her stories centers on the sexual and emotional problems encountered by women in marriage.

Dealing with such issues distinguishes her among writers, male and female, in the Arab world, where explicit references to these questions are considered by many to be taboo.

In 1955 she wrote a story based on the experience of her twin sister, who had a mental breakdown and died after she found her husband with another woman. Though the story was considered somewhat shocking, it was published.

Her husband was furious, not so much because of the subject matter, but because writing gave her a kind of independence and was perceived as undermining his authority as a husband and head of the family.

She continued to write, using pen-names, but when he found out, her husband forbade that too. He threw her out of the house. She went back to her own family, but received no sympathy from her father, who also said she should stop writing.

But against those people who urged her to get a divorce, Alifa Rifaat argued that «it is better to be an unknown wife than a well-known writer». For the next 15 years she wrote a little, and then only in secret. But

being forced to repress the urge to be read brought her close to a nervous breakdown, a state vividly evoked in some of her stories.

Finally, in the early 1970's, her husband relented and she began to write again. The result was her collection of short stories, «Distant View from a Minaret,» which dwell on the tensions, dilemmas and dreams of women in marriage.

Rifaat, however, is not a feminist in the Western sense. Women, she says, have a right to be fulfilled in their sexual and emotional lives, though she does not question marital relationships as such. What she does argue is that men should wield the power they have over women in marriage much more responsibly than they usually do. She also argues for more sexual education for women, «if only through books».

While her stories reflect primarily her own experience, in the years she spent travelling around Egypt with her husband (in the course of his work as a policeman) she met many other women and learned of their problems.

«We used to talk freely and we discussed especially the question of sexual fulfilment - because our society does not allow us to experience sex as freely as a Western woman does,» she told Sarah Graham - Brown in an interview with the Middle East magazine.

«We have our traditions and our religion,» she concluded.

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