

# Contemporary Arab Feminine Poetry

Feminine poetry is not a product of our age. Women poets appeared in ancient as well as in modern times. The Ancient Greeks and Hebrews produced women poets and those who practised certain arts akin to poetry: the priestesses and the prophetesses. Arabic literature counts at least 200 women poets in pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, but unfortunately most of their poetry has been lost.

The period of Arab awakening which started around 1800 witnessed a revival of Arab poetry among both men and women. In the latter part of the 19th century there were at least four women poets who wrote poetry of the traditional type.

In the early twentieth century, which produced neo-classical literature characterized by social consciousness, women writers were more numerous than women poets. The period saw the rise of distinguished women essayists and journalists like May Ziadeh, Salma Sayegh, Marie Ajami, Malak Hafni Nassef, and many others who devoted their pens to the promotion of social reform in all its forms. While they claimed woman's emancipation from ignorance and harmful traditions, they also claimed national independence, educational reform, social justice, eradication of poverty and misery. They identified their own needs with those of their respective countries and were more interested in general welfare than in their own feminist demands.

During the last forty years, a new outburst of poetry took place, including both women and men poets. The contributing factors may be condensed as follows:

In the first place, we may mention the cultural influence of foreign schools and institutions in countries placed under foreign mandate or foreign control, like Lebanon, Syria and Egypt. In 1948, Maurice Sacre, who compiled an anthology of Lebanese authors in the French language, was able to count 500 Lebanese writers in French in and outside Lebanon. No less important was the literary production of Lebanese and Arab authors in the English language, although most was produced by emigrants.

In Iraq, which remained only a short time under British control, a direct contact with English literature was possible to the students of the Higher Teachers Training College of Bagdad. As a result, an original type of poetry, strongly influenced by modern English poetry, came into being, creating a poetic school which influenced the rest of the Arab world.

A second factor in poetic development has been the popularization of free verse and prose poems, which freed poetry from classical rules and made access to it easier,

though to certain experts this new poetry seemed more difficult than traditional poetry.

A third factor has been the spread of culture among the various classes of people and the dissemination of political and social ideologies which mobilized for their publicity all forms of mass media including poetry.

Contemporary women poets of the Arab world count about fifty, but it would be a vain effort to try to reach them all or to get hold of all their works. So far, we have at the Institute for Women's Studies the complete or incomplete works of 30 of them. The topics treated by these women are most varied. The traditional topic of love occupies a large portion of their poetry, but it is treated in a non-traditional manner and takes on various forms: romantic, passionate, erotic, mystic, clearly showing the desire of these poets to assert their freedom and defy modern public opinion by declaring their sentiments without fear or disguise. Fedwa Tukan, an outstanding Jordanian poet, devotes to love her best poems. The same is true of May Murr, the Lebanese poet who writes mainly in French, and of Edvick Shayboub who published two volumes of Arabic prose-poems. The women mentioned adopt a positive or favorable attitude toward love in its romantic or erotic form, but there are those who, like Venus Khoury, revolt against passionate love that drives lovers to despair and suicide, or take an ironic attitude toward pseudo-romantic love in which lovers repeat to each other commonplace, imitative expressions.

There are also those who rebel against fetters imposed on love. Hoda Adib says in one poem:

A man and a woman  
with fastened wrists  
Are swung like bells,  
They bleed from the chest, from the back;  
Their bodies are laid on the wheel of torture  
Patients are burned, so the disease of love may  
not spread ...

Samia Tutunji attacks in her French poems, "Multiple Presences," the traditional education of women which prepares them to be sexual objects and to serve as mere tools for child-bearing. She denounces the matrimonial virtues which impose on the wife obedience and faithfulness to a domineering and unfaithful husband.

Revolt in feminine poetry does not attack only traditional attitudes and practices connected with woman. There is also revolt against war, against traditional methods of education, against religious rituals and superficial forms of worship, against unjust treatment of illegitimate children, against corruption and injustice in all their forms.

Revolt in this poetry takes sometimes a form of escape from reality to dreamland. May Rihani, a poet of rebellion in her first collection, resorts in her second one to the fanciful world of childhood where people do not grow; time is motionless; fire does not hurt; grass does not thirst. That dreamland is free from disease, the inhabitants use singing instead of speech; to them reality and dream are one. Nadia Tuéni, who has published in French several collections with a surrealistic tendency, is another poet of escape who sings her nostalgia for the dreamland of childhood. She longs for the land which has no sun, no waking, no sky overhead, only trees and singing birds. Nohad Salameh, poet and journalist in the French language, seeks relief and happiness in self-denial, service and philanthropic work, like Martin Luther King and other humanitarian mystics.

A few of these poets express in their poetry certain philosophical ideas. Nazik al-Malaika depicts man's vain struggle against time. She longs for the road that has no end, for the visitor who never comes, thus showing that expectation of an event carries more pleasure than its realization.

Andrée Chédid, a Lebanese poet and novelist in the French language, devotes about ten collections of poems to an analysis of the message of poetry in which she sees the salvation of the world. "It is the art that opens unlimited paths to deeper self-knowledge, self-discovery and endless personal enrichment." Her poetry carries an

enthusiastic call to persistent search in the realm of the unknown, to an optimistic faith in life in spite of its shortcomings.

Another Lebanese poet, Hoda Naamani, who has published four Arabic collections between 1970 and 1978, draws her inspiration from Oriental mystic poetry. She uses mystic prayers and symbols, combines mystic expressions with surrealistic abstruseness, to convey progressive ideas of worship, justice, sexual equality, social reform, and universal brotherhood.

Though rich and varied in content, this poetry is still limited in scope. It consists mainly of a negative revolt against existing wrongs but fails to indicate positive ways of action. It fails to show what feminine liberation really means, what potentialities qualify a woman to lead her own independent life, to create a new personality which would not be a slavish copy of masculine models nor a repetition of past feminine patterns.

Finally, if this poetry has a good many defects as to content, it shows on the other hand a high degree of success in form. Those who write in French or English reveal a mastery of the language, fluency, and originality of style. Poets of the Arabic language are equally successful in creating original imagery and handling the new forms inspired from western poetry. One of them, Nazik al-Malaika, is the initiator of a new form of free verse, based on the use of irregular meter and rhythm, contrasting with the regularity of traditional poetry.

## Hang Him with a Moonlight Ray

One of several poems decrying war, written by Venus Khoury, a Lebanese poet in the French language.

Do you know that deserter  
 Who took the horizon for a road?  
 He had run away from the shrieks of hatred,  
 From threatening fists,  
 From the blood-covered hands of freedom,  
 Blood bespattering the crowds  
 Leaving its stains on the cheeks of the innocent.  
 Those emaciated faces were nothing but pale hosts,  
 Those deserted streets, only empty naves,  
 So the great nations might play the game of war!  
 Whether it be called Black Congo,  
 Or yellow Vietnam, no importance,  
 Since blood with its rancid smell  
 Still flows to the sea  
 Where it is white-washed and used to deck  
 The colors of sunset.  
 Should they shoot him? drown him? bury  
 , him alive under a dune?  
 This unfortunate soldier, this deserter of time  
 Who was not intoxicated by the hot smell of blood?  
 Nay, hang him with a moonlight ray,  
 This dreamer, this miserable dreamer.

(Translated from the French)

