

# Book Reviews



## ***Zakirah lil-Mustaqbal: Maousou'at al-Katiba al-'Arabiyya (1873-1999) (Memory for the Future: an Encyclopedia of Arab Women Writers (1873-1999)), 4 Volumes,***

Nour, the Arab Women's Publishing House in Cairo and the Supreme Council of Culture, Cairo, 2004, paperback, 1310 pages.

### **Setting the Record Straight: The Literary History of Women Writers in the Arab World**

Is there a distinctive women's tradition in Arabic literature? To what extent are Arab women writers engaged in the process of social and political change in their respective countries? What are the cultural and political forces that helped shape the female literary tradition in the Arab world? These are some of the questions addressed in this extensive and informative reference on the literary history of Arab women writers. In twelve essays by leading critics and writers, the four volumes of the encyclopedia cover the female literary tradition in the Arab world for more than a century, from the last two decades of the 19th century through the whole of the twentieth. The twelve contributors have embarked on an unprecedented project featuring more than 1,142 writers classified under ten geographical areas. The introductions to the various sections within the four volumes reflect an awareness of the diversity in such a broad consideration of past experiences and present realities in the intricate context of the Arab world. Selected works are discussed in terms of thematic and biographical outlines, followed by insightful summaries of the authors' major texts.

In keeping with the mission of offering accessible introductions to as many writers as possible, the contributors have refrained from invoking literary theory except in the most straightforward way. In this respect, one can claim that while the encyclopedia may appear to have targeted a specific audience of readers and researchers — those specifically interested in the development of Arab women's literature, it also seeks to introduce large sections of a wider audience to the ever present, albeit often overlooked, female literary voice in our tradition. Individual essays cover women's writings in five literary genres: poetry, the novel, the short story, autobiography, and drama. Besides the critical introductions to pioneering generations of female Arab literati such as Zeinab Fawaz and Labiba Hashim (Lebanon), Mayy Ziyada and Aisha Taymour (Egypt), Marie Ajami and

Marianna Marash (Syria), Fadwa Tuqan (Palestine), and Nazik al-Malaika (Iraq), the encyclopedia offers a compendium of literary works in which as many writers as possible are represented. The bibliographical notes and the indexes are an excellent way of offering a comprehensive overview. In addition to this, excerpts from selected works by various writers encourage readers to read the entire works. A further bonus is a list of informative biographical notes on the writers and their works. The encyclopedia thus constitutes an essential work of reference, absolutely indispensable for both readers and researchers, as much as it offers a stimulating starting point for scholars interested in the central preoccupation of contemporary critical thinking about Arabic literature in general, and the development of women's literature in particular.

### Heiresses to the Past

In their introduction to the encyclopedia, the editors invoke the poetry of al-Khansaa', the pre-Islamic poet whose famous elegies in which she bewailed her valiant brothers reflect not only her poignant and vivid emotion, but also a poetry that lacks neither wit nor audacity. Thus, the necessity of exploring the literary tradition of Arab women writers is, from the outset, accentuated. The enterprise can therefore be described as a history of literature as much as a history of Arab women's literature. This project in fact seeks to construct a framework for the study of a very rich tradition. Just as it may be described as archeological in its method, so it is also distinguished from other traditional encyclopedias in comprising the greatest and most famous names alongside those of supposedly marginal as well as young writers. The editors do not claim that there is one single "great tradition" with no inequities or restrictions. Indeed, exploring the works does not reveal the existence of a monolithic Arab woman's voice, but rather "a rich and complex tradition that comprises the image of the worshipper reciting her Sufi love poems, the erudite and powerful princess, the concubine playing her lute to please her master, the powerful and free woman who dares to speak openly even lasciviously, the meek and timid who speaks behind a veil, and of course, the jewel in the crown, Shahrazad, the lady most eloquent, telling tales that surpass time and space, tales that deliver her from the King's boudoir, setting her free to the world's vast space" (editors, Introduction, I: 16).

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In contrast to a traditional Orientalist prejudice that stereotypes Arab women as one single entity, the project follows the trajectory of Arab women's literary tradition from the formative years which witnessed the spread of women's societies and literary "salons" in Lebanon, Syria and Egypt during the last two decades of the 19th century and throughout the first half of the 20th century. This period was followed by a "boom" of literary works, notably fiction, in the mid-twentieth century, revealing a strong engagement with other forces in society in a process of vast social and political change that was taking place in the wake of the independence of various Arab countries. This development, in turn, leads to the emergence of new forms of writing, such as autobiography, during the last three decades of the 20th century. The introduction deftly examines the social and political forces at work in post-revolutionary Arab countries throughout the sixties and seventies. The defeat in the 1967 war and the subsequent wars that resulted in further occupation of Palestine, together with the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon and the sequel of Gulf wars in Iraq, have undoubtedly had important effects on the literary production of the writers.

However, the introduction also reveals the extent to which social and political oppression shaped a certain 'female sensibility' in a literary style that coincides with the existentialist experience of oppression, war, and occupation in a number of Arab countries, revealing a state of double-oppression. This has found voice in the works of writers who represent themselves as 'colonized' both sexually and politically. The list seems endless but it includes writers that belong to the end of 19th century such as Zeinab Fawaz, Alice Boutros al-Boustani, Samira Azzam, and Mariam Meshaal who wrote about the occupation of Palestine in the mid-twentieth century as well as the most recent voices like Batoul el-Khodeiri (Iraq), Miral el-Tahawi (Egypt), and Bouthanina Khidr Mekki (Sudan). It comes as no surprise then that contemporary women writers have been experimenting with various literary forms reflecting their fragmented societies torn by wars and political strife: the works of Hanan el-Sheikh and Huda Barakat are discussed as representatives of this spirit (El-Eid, Introduction, 1: 43-47). Moreover, while the introduction points to the emergence of what has been defined as a "hybrid literary tradition" of Arab women writers in exile, it also considers new subversive narrative features such as magical realism and structur-

# Book Reviews

al indeterminacy which challenge traditional 'closed' and realistic forms (editors, Introduction, I: 22).

As we proceed through each section that takes us on a journey through the development of literary traditions in each country, we cannot lose sight of the presence of an imaginative continuum that goes beyond the tradition of Shahrazad. Ferial Ghazoul's introduction to the section on Iraq is exemplary in this respect. She traces the beginnings of an Iraqi women's literary tradition back to Sumeria and Babylon, and later to a rich poetic tradition during the Islamic Caliphate, then gives us an account of 20th century poetry, including the influence of the great Nazik el-Malaika, and the experimentation with new poetic forms that established her as the pioneer of modern poetry in the Arab world (Ghazoul, Introduction, 3: 14-16) In the same vein, Radwa Ashour's introduction to Palestine and Jordan puts the Palestinian writer in the larger historical context of occupation, displacement and exile, without losing sight of recent developments and experimentation at the level of form. We are offered a quick assessment of the descriptive feminist outlook of Sahar Khalifa, the experimental narrative forms of Liana Badr and Laila al-Atrash's brand of Bildungsroman (Ashour, Introduction, 3: 136-37).

## A Literature of their Own?

Notwithstanding the important and challenging achievement of the project at hand, one has to ask why the editorial board avoided major issues that such a vast project would be expected to discuss: first the question of the place of women writers in mainstream Arab literary history, then the — factors that have aided or inhibited their writing, and how literary criticism initially responded to their work. Although they appear later in some of the contributions, these questions are unjustifiably absent from the editorial introduction. One interpretation could be that the contributors are alert to the 'danger' of creating a female tradition in and for itself. Maybe they find that talking of a distinct female tradition, or even the notion of a "female imagination", carries the danger of becoming ahistorical or apolitical in a reality that is permeated by major historical and political events, and risks detachment from the processes of social and political change. Whatever the reasons for this absence, the Encyclopedia has managed, even beyond the contributors' own intentions, to expose the Arab mainstream literary tradition by forcefully carving

out a 'place' for the Arab woman writer in that tradition. The obvious consequence of this achievement is the introduction of the question of gender into the literary historical scene.

Although there are some differences in critical approaches and interpretations among the contributors, approaches that vary from the descriptive and historical (Berrada and el-Hadidi) to the critical and deconstructive (Ghazoul and el-Kady), several other features distinguish the collective character of the effort. Most of the contributors mention the widespread practice of using pen-names by women writers, especially in the beginnings. However, the practice is by no means an Arabic phenomenon. Western literature has been familiar with this tradition too. Yet while Western writers often chose avowedly masculine names such as George Eliot and Georges Sand as pseudonyms, Arab women writers' pen-names reflect their unwillingness to compromise their "femininity", opting for names whose literal meaning describes their state: Bahithat al-Badiya (Searcher in the Desert) in Egypt, Rafikat Attabi'a (Nature's Companion) in Morocco, and Sabira (The Patient One) al-Ezzy in Iraq are just a few examples.

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Other similarities are more related to major themes in the literary texts. First, there is the questioning of the familiar dichotomy between tradition and modernity. This questioning can be overt, as in Yumna el-Eid's, Eman el-Kady's and Hoda el-Sadda's introductions to the writers in Lebanon, Syria and Egypt, respectively; or covert as in Souad al-Manee's critique in her introduction to women's literature in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf countries (volume 4). However, there is a consensus among most of the critics to label women's emergence into the public sphere as radical, new or

"modernistic" in spirit. Apart from the fact that such dualism needs reconsideration, it remains a fact that the spread of women's education has had a direct effect on the emergence of women's writing all over the Arab world.

Second, the involvement of women in the national liberation movements is another common denominator in women's writings throughout the Arab world. Several introductions to the various sections of the encyclopedia examine the modernity of early twentieth century women's literary circles within a larger national perspec-

tive. El-Kadi and al-Haddidi on Syria, Ashour on Palestine and Jordan, and Berrada on Maghrebi women's literature, all seek to explore the relationship between Arab women's literary production and the discourses of nationalism that supported it. Such approaches take seriously the experience of colonialism, the encounter with the West, and the various projects of liberation in Arab societies in general on the one hand, and the progress, emancipation and empowerment of women on the other. While trying to take a middle way between understating or overemphasizing the role of the West in such progress (Introduction, I: 16-17), most of the contributors attempt to look for ways to acknowledge the specificity of the local female social, political and literary scene while interrogating the complex ways in which British and French colonial powers were fundamental to the development of a modern consciousness. The critics referred to above have indeed pointed out this history and how its postcolonial legacy has had a profound influence on the emergence and development of women's literature in the region.

Another common feature is the notion of writing as a form of resistance. This has come to designate the literary production of writers entrenched in the tradition of Shahrazad, the perpetual storyteller who saves her life through her narrative skills. Whether the protagonist is Laila in El-Zayat's *The Open Door* (1960) seeking to find her place and define her role in a society dominated by the male subject, or Heba in Ilham Mansour's *To Heba* (1991) and *Heba in the Journey of the Body* (1994), and her attempt to carve her own niche in the world against the backdrop of civil war in Lebanon and the ensuing fragmentation and insanity, such writers perform the act of writing as a form of resistance and as an extension of Shahrazad's role as storyteller. Thus, the intertwining of the personal and the national is one distinctive feature of women's writing in the views of the various critics in the Encyclopedia. Berrada's critical study in volume 3, for instance, seeks to accentuate the success of Maghrebi writers in exploring the private world and the subjective self in both its emotional and sexual dimensions, never losing sight of its interaction with the more general national considerations. His reference to the major works of Aroussia el-Nalouty (Tunisia), Ahlam Mustaghanmi (Algeria) and Laila Abouzeid (Morocco) and the excerpts that follow the study clearly illustrate such observations. However, Berrada does not attempt to tackle the problems of the woman writer in this respect, hence offering a descriptive

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rather than a critical account. For instance, there is no reference to the dilemma the writer faces when she tries to write about her own deep responses, particularly sexual, and the anxiety she feels as she reveals the truth about her own experiences as a body. Indeed, none of the reviewers or critics referred to this dilemma except in passing. Yumna el-Eid's comment on the scarcity of autobiographies in our literary tradition in general (Volume 1: 67) and Souad el-Manee's remark that the genre is virtually non-existent in the literary scene in the Gulf (Introduction, 4: 28) fall short of exploring women's relationship with a genre that allows them to express their grim struggle for selfhood. However, such references can encourage further studies on the discussion of gender and literary form in Arabic literature.

The task of any critic reviewing the works of women writers runs a double risk. First, she bears the intrinsic problem of the woman writer who, as expressing the "female sensibility", risks being labeled "narrow" and "particular". Second, she runs the constant risk of being sexually biased as she deals with a distinct female literary tradition. However, the critics who have contributed to The Encyclopedia of the Arab Woman Writer have avoided such risks as they regard that female literary tradition as an evolving relationship between women writers and their societies. Hence, one of the greatest achievements of this project is that it helps to end the alienation of Arab women writers through delineating some form of collective identity for them. Acknowledging the weight of a literary tradition with common struggles, impulses and hopes, yet being sensitive to the new voices that grapple with a new reality, the contributors to this important work have succeeded in retrieving the past as they look to the future.

Reviewed by Faten Morsy

### Endnotes

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